

From ECT III to PARES: Lessons in sustainability and community ownership in school feeding in Mozambique



The USDA McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program in Mozambique has supported school feeding, literacy, and community health through two consecutive project cycles, implemented by World Vision in Nampula and Zambézia Provinces: Educating Children Together (ECT) III and Partnering for Sustainable Education Outcomes (PARES). Both cycles share the same fundamental requirement for sustainability: local communities and governments must take ownership of school feeding activities beyond the life of a project. Lessons from one cycle too often fail to carry into the next, a gap PARES was deliberately designed to close.

This learning brief traces that evidence-to-adaptation journey: what ECT III showed about what sustains and what does not, and how those findings directly shaped the design of PARES. It highlights the specific lessons PARES is applying and the results emerging so far.

Drivers of sustainability

Community ownership, local procurement, and government engagement are widely recognized as core drivers of sustainability in donor-funded school feeding programs, alongside the resources and motivation needed to sustain results over time. School feeding programs endure beyond a project cycle when these drivers are built in from the start:

- **Community ownership and capacity:** Communities contribute resources and labor and are equipped to manage and maintain program assets.
- **Local government ownership:** Government structures are formally embedded so oversight and coordination outlast the project.
- **Resources:** Communities and schools have the financial management and input access needed to sustain activities without ongoing project funding.
- **Motivation:** Communities and farmers have a sustained incentive, economic or otherwise, to stay engaged.
- **Local procurement:** A formal channel connects local farmers to school meal programs, creating an economic reason for continued participation.

The sections that follow examine how ECT III performed against these drivers, where gaps remained, and how PARES is applying these lessons.

PROJECTS AT A GLANCE

Projects:

- Educating Children Together (ECT) III
- Partnering for Sustainable Education Outcomes (PARES)

Timeframe: ECT III (2019–2025) | PARES (2024–2028)

Location: Mozambique

- ECT III: Nacarôa and Muecate districts (Nampula Province)
- PARES: Milange district (Zambézia Province); Meconta and Monapo districts (Nampula Province)

Donor: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole Program

Scale:

- ECT III: 169,367 participants across 160 schools
- PARES: 82,844 participants across 157 schools (to date)

Goal: Improve food security, nutrition, and education outcomes through sustainable school feeding, WASH, community mobilization, and government systems strengthening

ECT III: Performance against sustainability drivers

Under ECT III, World Vision implemented school feeding, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, reading camps and libraries, teacher and school administrators training, Farmer Associations strengthening, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), Community Health Volunteers, cooking demonstrations, deworming campaigns, and Health Clubs. ECT III demonstrated strong performance in community ownership and handover, with many community-led structures continuing to function after project support ended. However, it also revealed important gaps in local procurement systems and the formal institutionalization of government engagement. While communities sustained many activities independently, school feeding itself proved more difficult to maintain without formal procurement mechanisms and stronger government ownership. Performance against the sustainability drivers varied by activity area:

Community ownership and capacity. At least 311 of 400 reading camps in Nacarôa remain active (a similar rate in Muecate), with district authorities using 36 Zonal Trainers of Trainers (TOTs) to orient new teachers independently. All 300 Community Health Volunteers and 100% of health committees were handed over to government health authorities and continue child growth monitoring and nutrition visits. Eight piped water systems remain operational, sustained by water committees charging 20 meticaís per month (approximately USD \$0.31) for maintenance, with one system serving over 2,600 users.

Gaps identified: Some water infrastructure, particularly small solar-pump systems, fell into disrepair where community maintenance plans were weak. Schools also received cooking equipment without the financial management frameworks needed to replenish it.

Local procurement. All 57 Farmer Associations were transitioned to the District Services for Economic Activities (SDAE) oversight, and many continue donating up to 30% of harvests to schools even without payment.

Gaps identified: Without a formal channel to sell produce to schools, school meal procurement did not continue once project funding ended. This gap directly informed PARES's design.

Local government ownership. ECT III built strong working relationships with government at district and provincial levels.

Gaps identified: These relationships were channeled through World Vision rather than embedded in formal structures. When the project ended, provincial-district linkages weakened.

PARES: A design shaped by ECT III lessons

PARES applies these lessons directly. Community contribution is now a prerequisite for school feeding support. A Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) component and Joint Procurement Committees (JPCs) create the farmer-to-school channel that sustains local procurement beyond the project cycle. Government engagement is anchored in formal structures—including memoranda of understanding (MOUs), task forces, and steering committees—so oversight continues independent of any single partner. The program builds on what ECT III got right while closing the gaps that prevented those gains from extending to school feeding.

Shift in community contributions

Communities must now purchase utensils, plates, and cups before school feeding begins, a direct reversal of ECT III practice. PARES also drives community contributions toward classroom construction, installs WASH infrastructure with explicit maintenance plans, and is creating start-up funds for VSLAs to pursue income-generating activities. World Vision provides supplementary funding for school gardens and a sub-grant supports Farmer Associations in procuring seeds and irrigation equipment. Community ownership is treated as a prerequisite, not an aspiration.



PARES Local and Regional Procurement showcase

Local and Regional Procurement and Joint Procurement Committees

PARES added an LRP component and established JPCs trained in procuring locally grown foods for school meals, creating the institutionalized farmer-to-school channel that ECT III lacked. This gives Farmer Associations a sustainable economic reason to remain engaged beyond the project cycle. A remaining challenge is water access in areas where complementary U.S. government WASH projects have been canceled, creating coverage gaps.

Government engagement: MOU, task forces, and national steering committees

PARES has embedded government engagement in formal structures: a signed MOU with the Ministry of Education and Culture, World Vision, and Save the Children; multi-level task forces at district, provincial, and national levels; and consistent advocacy through the National School Meals Steering Committee. Together, these mechanisms deepen the Government of Mozambique's ownership of school feeding and reduce the single-partner dependency that weakened ECT III's government handover.

The Government of Mozambique approved the National School Feeding Strategy in July 2026 following years of advocacy by World Vision and several civil society and nongovernmental organizations. This milestone demonstrates growing national ownership of school feeding and reflects the value of sustained engagement through formal coordination structures. Sustained advocacy to secure national budget allocations for school feeding remains the critical long-term lever. These project-level structures will be most effective when complemented by continued U.S. government engagement with the Government of Mozambique. The project can build the relationships and evidence that support continued investment in school feeding, but bilateral engagement carries the diplomatic weight needed to translate policy commitment into a sustained government budget allocation.

Results and lessons learned from PARES to date

While PARES is still in the early stages of implementation, fiscal year 2025 data provide encouraging evidence that key sustainability mechanisms are taking hold. Farmer engagement exceeded expectations and JPCs are now operational and supporting local procurement processes for school meals. Formal government engagement structures are also functioning as intended, strengthening coordination and oversight at district, provincial, and national levels. The Government of Mozambique's approval of the National School Feeding Strategy in July 2026 provides early evidence that these structures and sustained advocacy efforts are helping advance national commitment to school feeding. These early results suggest progress toward addressing several sustainability challenges identified under ECT III.

At the same time, the fiscal year 2025 Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) Survey and Indicator Performance Tracking Table (IPTT) surfaced six lessons now shaping PARES's fiscal year 2026 design:

- School feeding drives attendance. Attendance averaged 75% against an 88% target, directly tied to

late feeding roll-out. With kitchens now complete, meal consistency must be protected.

- Infrastructure alone does not change behavior. 71% of schools have gender-segregated latrines and 68% have soap, but only 31% of students can identify critical handwashing moments. PARES must shift from construction to intensive hygiene mentoring through Health Clubs.
- Teacher quality requires teacher presence. 84% of teachers apply advanced Unlock Literacy techniques, World Vision's evidence-based approach to improving early grade reading outcomes, but an 81% teacher attendance rate limits impact. School meals should be leveraged as a mechanism to support both teacher and student attendance.
- The value of education must be reframed for families. Only 52% of parents can name three benefits of education, and few link schooling to economic opportunity. Messaging must connect education to long-term livelihoods to reduce agricultural labor pull-out.
- Farmer capacity must be bolstered to sustain local procurement. 1,541 farmers across 74 groups engaged (154% of target), with many contributing 30% of harvests. But farmers are input-poor, and the LRP model requires pairing procurement structures with basic agricultural inputs to be truly sustainable.
- Gender-neutral approaches reinforce existing inequalities. Male administrator training reached 141% of target; female training reached only 77%. The local school cluster system (ZIPs) must actively nominate female educators for certification and leadership roles.

Monitoring sustainability over time

PARES will track the durability of its sustainability innovations through routine IPTT indicators and dedicated sustainability checkpoints, including: JPC functionality and local procurement volumes/value after project facilitation declines; community contribution compliance rates (utensils, plates, cups, and maintenance funds); task force meeting regularity and decisions taken without World Vision facilitation; and VSLA start-up fund utilization and income generated. These measures will be reviewed annually and at mid-term to inform course corrections while the project can still influence outcomes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect what worked in the Mozambique context and outline how the underlying principles could apply across other McGovern-Dole programs, where government capacity and market structures vary.

1. Sustained government advocacy is necessary to translate policy commitment into lasting budget allocation.

The Government of Mozambique's approval of the National School Feeding Strategy in July 2026 demonstrates that PARES' structured engagement through its MOU, multi-level task forces, and National School Meals Steering Committee contributed to a national policy commitment. Sustained advocacy is now needed to convert that commitment into lasting budget allocation, which remains largely outside the project's control. Full government ownership depends in part on bilateral engagement and broader country-level strategic relationships, which carry far more leverage than a single project can generate. In other McGovern-Dole contexts, project design should build the relationships, evidence, and formal structures that support government investment while recognizing that sustained government-to-government engagement may be necessary to secure long-term financing.

2. Community sensitization must be prioritized from the start.

PARES began sensitization at project launch and continued it throughout, and early results validate the approach. This principle holds across contexts: sensitization should begin at launch, rather than be retrofitted once activities are underway, regardless of the specific engagement model used.

3. Require community contributions before project inputs are provided.

In Mozambique, PARES requires communities to purchase utensils, plates, and cups before school feeding begins. The contribution-first principle applies broadly, but the specific items and format of contribution should reflect what is locally feasible and culturally appropriate in each context.

4. Embed government coordination into formal structures early.

PARES's task force and MOU model, anchored at district, provincial, and national levels, should be established at project launch rather than added retrospectively. The specific instruments will vary: some contexts may support multi-level task forces and signed MOUs, while others may require different formal mechanisms to achieve the same goal of institutionalized government engagement.

5. Formalize a local procurement mechanism suited to each country's government and market structure.

PARES established JPCs to connect Farmer Associations directly to schools—a mechanism that works in Mozambique because of how government supports local procurement structures. In other

McGovern-Dole contexts, this level of government-backed procurement infrastructure may not be available, so the underlying principle, a formal and lasting channel from local farmers to school meals, matters more than replicating the JPC model itself.

Conclusion

ECT III demonstrated that community structures can endure when designed with intentional handover. Reading camps, Community Health Volunteers, water committees, and Farmer Associations are all still functioning. At the same time, ECT III revealed an important limitation: community ownership alone was not enough to sustain school feeding. While local structures, volunteers, and community groups remained active, the absence of formal procurement mechanisms and government financing limited the continuation of school feeding once project support ended.

PARES was designed to close that gap. Through contribution-first community engagement, operational JPCs, formal government coordination structures, and sustained advocacy for public investment, the project is building the institutional and financial systems needed to complement strong community ownership.

The central lesson is clear: community ownership is essential for sustainability, but school feeding systems require more than community commitment alone. Lasting results depend on combining community engagement with formal procurement mechanisms, government leadership, and long-term financing. By strengthening all three, PARES is positioned to deliver benefits that continue beyond the life of the project. More than a set of lessons on sustainability, this is a direct example of program evidence shaping the design of the next cycle, the kind of adaptive, learning-driven programming that strengthens school feeding investments over time.

