



Who Gives When Others Give? Community Contributions to School Meals in Mozambique

Authors: James Allen IV, Naureen Karachiwalla, and Deboleena Rakshit

Abstract

Community-based programs often depend on households contributing time, money, or other resources, but how do people donate relative to other community members' contributions? While economic theory often predicts that people will contribute less when others contribute (free-riding), a common finding in behavioral economics is that people are actually more willing to contribute when others contribute, though all of this evidence comes from computer-based games in high-income countries. This study tests that assumption in the context of a new school meals program in rural Mozambique. This study was conducted under the Partnering for Sustainable Education Outcomes (PARES) project, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a subrecipient under the PARES award, conducted this study as part of the PARES evaluation. Using a field-adapted contributions game with 1,248 households across 157 communities, we examine how households' willingness to donate money or volunteer time changes depending on how many other households in their community contribute. Contrary to much of the existing evidence, many households were less willing to contribute when more others contributed, though this varied by perceptions of community social cohesion. Our novel finding suggests that community contribution behavior in low-income field settings may differ substantially from patterns documented in high-income laboratory settings.

Background

School meals programs can improve children's nutrition, attendance, and learning, but they often require community support to operate effectively. In the Mozambican program studied here, donors and implementing partners provide the main food and infrastructure, while communities are asked to help with smaller purchases and volunteer labor. Volunteers are needed to cook, serve meals, collect firewood, wash dishes, and clean after meals are served.

This creates a collective action problem, complicated by the potential for individuals' willingness to contribute to be affected by others' contributions—a concept known as “conditional contributions”. If many households contribute, the program is easier to sustain. Conditional contributions may be affected in either direction: on the one hand, households might feel social pressure to contribute if many others are

doing so (norm conformity); on the other hand, each household might also feel that there is less need to contribute if others are already doing so (free-riding). Understanding how households respond to others' contributions is therefore

important for designing community-based programs that depend on local participation.

Most previous studies find that many people are “conditional cooperators”: they contribute more when others contribute more (Thöni and Volk, 2018). However, this evidence comes mainly from laboratory or online studies in high-income countries. Whether these patterns extend to rural households in Mozambique—where resources are scarce, contributions support a real school meals program, and social cohesion and norms of reciprocity may shape collective action—is an open empirical question.

Methodology

The study was embedded in the baseline survey of the Partnering for Sustainable Education Outcomes (PARES) evaluation, which offers school meals and complementary interventions in three districts across Nampula and Zambezia provinces. Eight eligible households were surveyed in each of 157 communities, for a total of 1,248 households.

Each household participated in two contribution exercises. First, households received 100 meticaís and were asked how much they would donate to the school meals program. Second, they were asked how many volunteer shifts they would provide out of 10 possible weekly shifts.

Then, for both money and volunteering, households were asked how much they would donate and volunteer depending on how many of the other seven households surveyed in their community contributed. This allowed the study to observe whether each household became more or less willing to contribute as more neighbors participated.

Key Findings

1. Households were highly willing to support the school meals program. Despite low incomes, most households were willing to contribute. More than 96 percent donated some portion of the 100 meticaís, and more than 97 percent volunteered at least one shift. On average, households donated 48 meticaís and volunteered 4.9 shifts. This suggests strong overall support for the school meals program.

2. Many households contributed less when more others contributed. Contrary to existing evidence, the most common type of contributor was “counter-conditional cooperator”: households contributed less as more other households contributed. This pattern accounted for 30 percent of households in the donation exercise and 35 percent in the volunteering exercise. These results contrast with the common laboratory finding that many people contribute more when others contribute more.

3. Social cohesion may shape contribution behavior. Households reporting higher perceived social cohesion in their community were less likely to fall into contribution types that gave little or nothing when everyone else contributed. They were more likely to contribute the same amount regardless of others’ behavior or to contribute more as others

contributed. This pattern is descriptive, but it suggests that trust, reciprocity, and shared community norms may influence how households respond to others’ participation.

Implications

These findings suggest that community participation may not always increase simply because households learn that others are contributing. In this

setting, some households appeared to reduce their own contributions when more others contributed, possibly because they felt the program already had enough support or because their own contribution seemed less necessary.

For school meals programs and similar community-based initiatives, mobilization strategies should account for the possibility that households respond differently to information about others’ participation. The results also highlight the need for more field-based research, especially in low-income settings where community programs are concrete, socially embedded, and resource constraints are substantial.

Conclusion

This study provides new evidence on how rural households in Mozambique respond to others’ willingness to support a school meals program. While most households were willing to contribute money and time, many did not follow the contribution patterns commonly found in previous studies. Instead, a large share contributed less when more others contributed.

These findings do not imply that community support for the program is weak. Rather, they show that contribution decisions are complex and may depend on how households understand need, fairness, responsibility, and the role of others in sustaining a shared program. Future research should examine why these patterns emerge and how community-based programs can encourage broad, sustained participation.

References

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