

Public Food Procurement Benchmarking: using a best practice approach to assess public food procurement from smallholder farmers

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Public Food Procurement (PFP) is used by governments all over the world as a strategy to advance social, economic and environmental goals. In the global South, it is often used to strengthen rural livelihoods and promote food security and nutrition outcomes. Given the growing importance of PFP programmes, it is crucial to develop evaluation tools to support better implementation and performance.

PFP Benchmarking is an evaluation methodology which assesses programmes against a set of international best practices. It determines how accessible public food markets are to smallholder farmers, and identifies any linkages between food procurement and food security and nutrition interventions. Furthermore, it determines the level of coordination with complementary strategies such as social protection and agricultural development programmes. The integrity of public procurement systems is a priority concern to most countries; therefore, PFP Benchmarking also incorporates this dimension, helping governments to ensure food purchases are also cost-effective, transparent and fair.

The foundation of PFP Benchmarking is a literature review that systematised the current knowledge on PFP from smallholder farmers (Miranda 2018). This review aimed at identifying evidence-based best practices to strengthen the participation of smallholder farmers in PFP markets and promote links with food security and nutrition goals. The review examined over 100 references, including empirical studies, to create a solid evidence base from which to develop the methodology.

Each best practice identified in the review was converted into benchmarking indicators. The indicators assess the extent to which a best practice has been adopted, and identify implementation features that could be improved to facilitate smallholder participation and promote food security and better nutrition among vulnerable groups. Importantly, they provide a standardised analytical framework that enables more objective analysis and cross-country comparisons.

The benchmarking indicators receive a score according to the level of implementation of a best practice. The scoring system ranges from 0 to 3, allowing stakeholders to visualise the level of implementation of a best practice—i.e. whether it is fully implemented, partially implemented or not implemented at all. PFP Benchmarking can thus offer a precise comparison of implementation features against best practice standards. This detailed evaluation not only provides actors with more information to inform decision-making but also highlights specific areas where change is needed to improve performance. The PFP Benchmarking scores, however, are not translated into country rankings. The focus is on identifying performance gaps and approaches to achieve benchmarks, and on sharing knowledge among countries.

Another key feature of PFP Benchmarking is that data are collected in a standardised manner. There are two different data collection tools—the desk review and a structured questionnaire—which are the same for every assessment. The desk review is guided by a set of predefined questions and aims to gather secondary data on PFP. These data are triangulated with the results from the structured questionnaire. The goal is to compare the results from both data sets, ensuring the validity and reliability of the data collected. The desk review also collects background information on PFP to establish the institutional and policy context in which it operates.

The benchmarking data collection uses focus groups comprising all stakeholders involved in designing and implementing the PFP programme. It includes farmers, community representatives and local governments. This approach allows for a larger sample size and reduces the time and cost involved in data collection. The exchanges between focus group participants also provide additional information on implementation features that may not be captured by the questionnaire. Crucially, the process stimulates active discussions on challenges and possible ways to achieve best practice standards.

PFP Benchmarking was first piloted in Guatemala in October 2018, where it was used to assess the national school feeding programme. It was subsequently used to assess public food procurement programmes in El Salvador (July 2019), Colombia (July 2019) and Honduras (November 2019). After each assessment, evaluators refined the methodology to ensure the practical applicability of the approach. The tool is thus able to evolve and respond to methodological challenges and include new best practices and thematic areas.

PFP Benchmarking is a novel approach that offers a number of benefits for programme and policy development. It is the first systematic attempt to collect cross-country data on PFP. The methodology provides a standardised approach to data collection and analysis that generates reliable data and allows cross-country comparisons. It also provides stakeholders with a useful evaluation tool that can clearly identify the level of implementation of a best practice and pinpoint very specific areas for improvement. The benchmarking process promotes knowledge-sharing among countries and supports stakeholders to find effective implementation features that can be adapted to their contexts.

References:

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