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Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions

Country Brief: Integrated programming to strengthen social protection and jobs in Burundi

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Summary

Burundi's integrated approach to school meals and social protection connects local food systems, cash-based assistance and human capital development. Anchored in the Home-Grown School Meals (HGSM) programme and the World Bank-funded Cash for Jobs project locally known as *Merankabandi*, the model stimulates rural markets, strengthens local food chains, supports vulnerable households (including refugees) and could create up to 161,000 jobs in the country (Bigirimana et al. 2024; WFP and World Bank 2024). The HGSM programme in Burundi has already helped to generate rural employment by involving over 60 farmer associations, many of which have reported significant increases in revenue due to their contracts to provide food for schools. While most jobs created so far are informal, the programme is laying the groundwork for more structured and potentially formal employment opportunities in agriculture, food supply chains and school-based services. A national impact evaluation is under way to quantify these effects more precisely. Moreover, it is

estimated that every US dollar invested yields about US\$5.8 in lifetime human capital returns if one takes education, health, nutrition and lifelong earning potential into account (Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025). Cross-country studies looking at multiple sectors suggest a return on investment of US\$7–35 for every US dollar invested (Verguet et al. 2020). The ongoing impact evaluation will provide further insights for the authorities of Burundi. Strong government leadership, coordinated multilateral support and integrated financing efforts – linking education, agriculture, nutrition and social protection – have been the key drivers of the progress made. While there are still broader ambitions to be fulfilled, such as formalizing employment pathways, involving the private sector and linking to contributory social insurance systems, Burundi's experience offers a scalable, integrated model that is highly relevant for low-income, fragile and displacement-affected settings of the kind faced by many countries nowadays.

Relevance to the Global Accelerator

There is growing recognition of the value of school meals programmes as multifaceted interventions that bolster human capital while stimulating local economies. In 14 low- and middle-income countries, school meals investments worth US\$11 billion have generated estimated annual human capital returns of US\$210 billion, along with annual social protection benefits of US\$7 billion and gains of US\$23 billion for local rural economies (Verguet et al. 2020). Globally, school meals for every 100,000 children translate into approximately 2,000 jobs – primarily in informal sectors such as agriculture, food preparation and transport (WFP 2022; WFP 2024a). That estimate reflects only direct employment, and so further analysis is required to assess how many decent, indirect and permanent jobs are generated through such programmes.

In Africa, where agriculture accounts for about 43 per cent of total employment (World Bank, n.d.), school feeding programmes create income opportunities for smallholder farmers and contribute to the strengthening of rural livelihoods. While most agricultural jobs remain informal, these programmes can help to improve the quality and predictability of such employment by fostering more stable demand, fair prices and stronger linkages with local markets. In countries such as Burundi, where informal rural employment is the norm, the priority is to support more stable and better-paying jobs within existing structures while laying the groundwork for future collaboration with the Government and various partners to promote the creation of formal and productive jobs.

Burundi exemplifies how integrated national systems can drive social and economic development. Its Home-Grown School Meals (HGSM) programme has significantly boosted

the local agricultural economy, increasing the share of local procurement to over 40 per cent of total food purchases in 2022, with 63 farmer associations reporting productivity gains of between 29 and 42 per cent and, in some cases, the doubling of their income (Bigirimana et al. 2024; Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025). Such local procurement strengthens rural food systems; creating a stable demand for farmers, many of whom are connected through cooperatives. Significantly, this supply chain is increasingly supported by cash-based social protection through the World Bank-funded Cash for Jobs project known locally as *Merankabandi*, which targets vulnerable households and refugees, linking direct assistance with productive inclusion. The cash assistance provided not only meets immediate consumption needs but also enables recipients to invest in productive activities, such as agricultural production and linkages with farmer associations that supply the HGSM programme, reinforcing local market inclusion, social cohesion, household resilience and economic empowerment. If the HGSM approach were adopted throughout the whole country, it could potentially create up to 160,000 rural jobs.

Given Burundi's status as a fragile, low-income country with strong political commitment, and its integration of refugees into national systems, the success of the circular economy approach there in promoting social cohesion and resilience could be replicated in other countries with similar circumstances (WFP 2024b; 2024c). Burundi's inclusive, integrated model is closely aligned with the Global Accelerator's three pillars of integrated policy approaches, integrated financing and multilateral cooperation (see box 1).

Box 1. Key lessons learned from the school meals programme in Burundi

Integrated policy approaches

- ◆ Aligning school meals, agriculture, education and social protection within national frameworks increases efficiency and sustainability.
- ◆ Integrating refugees systematically into the national *Merankabandi* cash transfer programme promotes social cohesion and reduces parallel humanitarian structures.
- ◆ Area-based approaches strengthen coherence across service delivery, economic development and human capital outcomes while promoting the development of associations and the formalization of the agricultural sector.

Integrated financing

- ◆ Blended financing – linking government allocations, support under the World Food Programme (WFP) and World Bank financing – allows interventions to be scaled up while strengthening national ownership.
- ◆ Political commitment to the expansion of national financing for school meals is essential to ensure sustainability, especially in fragile settings.

- ◆ Productivity increases and the development of farmer associations help to enhance the income of agricultural workers, with positive spillover effects on the local economy.

Multilateral cooperation

- ◆ Coordination among the WFP, the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), donors such as the Kingdom of the Netherlands, local authorities and associations has enabled coherent programming that connects humanitarian needs with development objectives.
- ◆ Collaborative impact evaluations and cost-benefit analyses to generate evidence – including evaluations conducted in partnership with academic institutions — have strengthened the investment case for integrated approaches.
- ◆ Future opportunities exist to expand partnerships with the private sector and with financial inclusion actors in order to amplify economic impacts.

Context

Burundi remains one of the world's most fragile and poorest countries. With over 70 per cent of its population living below the poverty line and more than 80 per cent dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, the country faces persistent challenges of food and nutrition insecurity, limited access to basic services and vulnerability to shocks (World Bank, n.d.; WFP 2024b). Agriculture accounts for approximately 85 per cent of total employment in Burundi (World Bank, n.d.); informal rural work dominates the labour market, underscoring the relevance of approaches that stimulate agricultural productivity and local economies.

The country also hosts a growing number of refugees and returnees, a trend driven by regional instability. In 2025, Burundi was hosting over 160,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in addition to managing high levels of internal displacement (UNHCR 2025). Refugees are increasingly included in national development planning through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and direct enrolment in national cash transfer programmes such as *Merankabandi* (WFP 2024c).

Burundi has demonstrated a growing commitment to social inclusion through the piloting and subsequent nationwide roll-out of cash transfers under the *Merankabandi* programme, which prioritizes vulnerable households, and also through its efforts to expand basic social services despite significant fiscal constraints. The Government has embedded school meals within its "Vision 2040–2060" through dedicated funding and national strategies, viewing school feeding not only as a social assistance programme but also as an engine for rural economic transformation (School Meals Coalition, n.d.).

Building on the solid evidence of the impact of such measures and on its participation in the School Meals Coalition, the Government recently tripled its financial commitment to the HGSM programme, to which it is now contributing US\$9 million per school year. This programme, which prioritizes local procurement from smallholder farmers, exemplifies the dual objective of strengthening human capital while stimulating local economic opportunities (Bigirimana et al. 2024; Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025).

Scaling up school feeding and social protection interventions is particularly relevant in view of global trends. School meals programmes are expanding rapidly across Africa and exhibit strong returns on investment for human capital, the local economy and agriculture while facilitating job creation (WFP 2022; Verguet et al. 2020).

Burundi presents a compelling case because it demonstrates that even in fragile settings – where the scope for formal job creation may be limited – integrated approaches can generate economic multipliers, support rural livelihoods and productive inclusion, and build resilience. Although the returns to the local economy still need to be quantified, a recent rigorous cost-benefit analysis estimated a lifetime human capital return of US\$4.6–7.6 for every US dollar invested in school meals. Impact evaluation data also point to improvements in school attendance, dietary diversity and savings among beneficiary households. Illustrating what can be achieved with strong political will, coherent policy alignment and operational partnerships between humanitarian and development actors, Burundi's approach offers valuable lessons for countries seeking to build inclusive, job-rich pathways to human capital development.

Description of the intervention

I. Design embedded in an integrated policy approach

Burundi's integrated approach combines school meals expansion, productive inclusion and social protection programming to foster inclusive economic development and resilience. The Home-Grown School Meals programme, embedded within the National School Feeding Programme, delivers meals to children in public schools using food sourced increasingly from local smallholder cooperatives

(Bigirimana et al. 2024; Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025). A commodity voucher-based procurement model, which involves sourcing locally produced and available food commodities, has strengthened direct linkages between schools and farmer groups, increasing predictability of demand for local producers and empowering decentralized administrations to assume greater ownership (WFP 2024c).

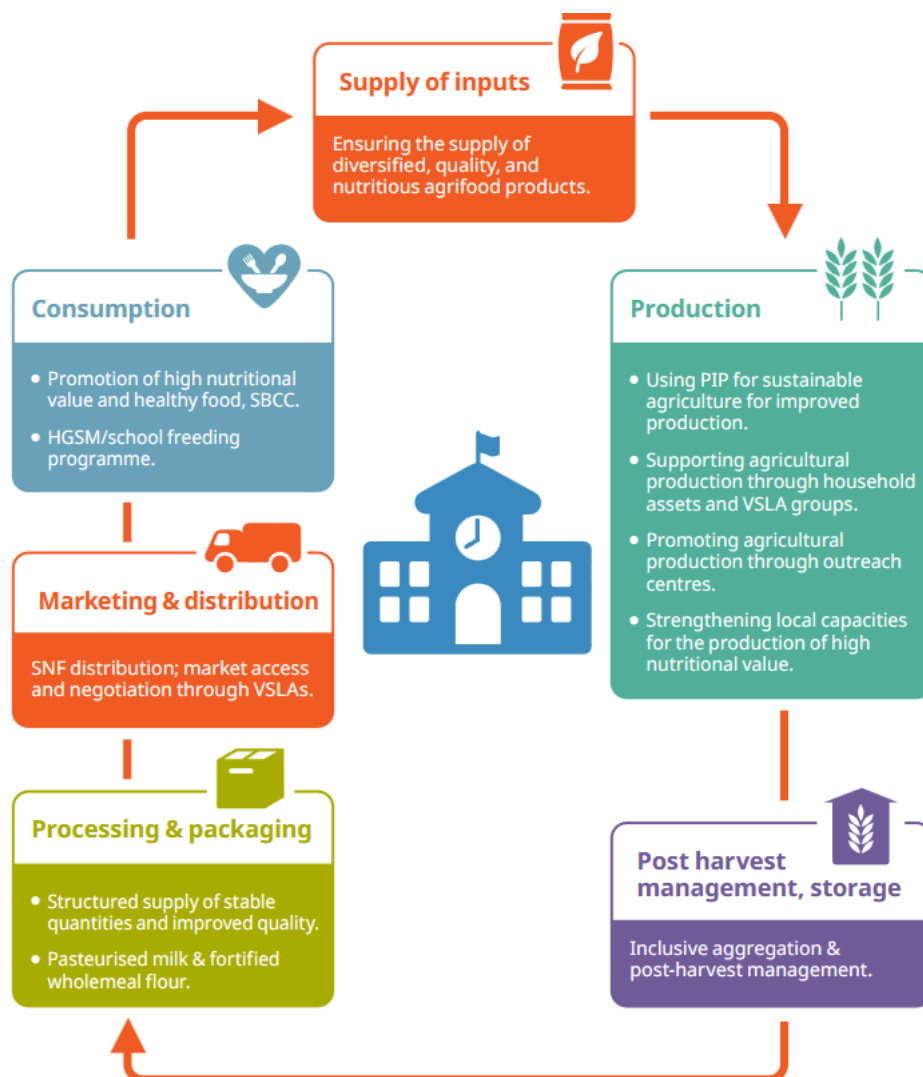
Box 2. What is an area-based approach?

An area-based approach integrates multiple interventions – school meals, nutrition, social protection, social and behaviour change communication, and productive inclusion– within a defined geographic area. It is aimed at strengthening local food systems by linking schools and crisis response platforms with local producers, processors and service providers. A minimum package of interventions is being developed through local consultations, targeting groups such as schoolchildren, smallholder farmers, village savings and loans associations, pregnant and lactating women, and refugees. Cash-based social assistance plays a catalytic role by enabling vulnerable populations to participate in local markets, reinforcing value chains and fostering inclusive local development, resilience and human capital outcomes.

The HGSM programme is complemented by the national cash transfer programme, *Merankabandi*, under which refugees and vulnerable Burundians receive cash-based assistance for basic needs, combined with livelihood seed capital, financial literacy training and support in setting up village savings and loans associations (WFP 2024b). When combined, these two programmes have the potential to create a virtuous cycle, connecting school meal demand with increased local production and social protection support, thereby strengthening food security, livelihoods and social cohesion.

A new area-based approach for integrated food systems (see figure 1 and box 2) is being piloted to geographically align school meals, social protection, nutrition (including distribution of specialized nutritious foods), social and behaviour change communication, and productive inclusion programming. Under this approach, schools and crisis response platforms are embedded within local food systems, acting as hubs for service delivery and as engines of rural economic growth (WFP 2024b).

Figure 1. The World Food Programme's area-based approach to integrated food systems in Burundi



Local agri-food value chain linked to HGSM programme in Burundi. The World Food Programme and government partners support a structured ecosystem that encompasses input supply, production, processing, storage, marketing and consumption, and which is anchored in local procurement for school meals.

HGSM = Home-Grown School Meals; PIP = Participatory Integrated Plan; SBCC = social and behaviour change communication; SNF = specialized nutritious foods; VSLA = village savings and loans association.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

With regard to **target groups**, the primary beneficiaries are **preschool- and primary school-aged children in public basic education schools**, particularly in food-insecure rural areas (Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025); **smallholder farmers organized into associations** supplying food commodities for school meals (Bigirimana et al. 2024); **extremely poor households** receiving *Merankabandi* “cash plus” support (WFP 2024b); **and refugee households** who are integrated into national social protection and productive inclusion initiatives, as opposed to being served through parallel humanitarian

systems (WFP 2024b; UNHCR 2025), thereby reducing long-term dependence on humanitarian assistance.

II. Implementation embedded in strong multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation

Implementation is led by the Government – through the ministry in charge of agriculture, the ministry in charge of education, the National Directorate for School Canteens and the ministry in charge of social affairs – and with

financial, technical and operational support from the World Bank and the WFP.

Farmer associations are being strengthened through targeted capacity-building efforts so that they are able to meet school procurement standards. A national social registry is under development, building on the *Merankabandi* information system and the delivery systems of various partners (such as the WFP's SCOPE platform) that are currently underpinning cash transfers and targeting mechanisms for vulnerable populations (WFP 2024b).

These interventions are not implemented in isolation but are deliberately “layered” to generate synergistic impact. For example, linking the productive activities of vulnerable households and refugees to associations already supplying the HGSM programme creates new economic opportunities, particularly in view of the plans to expand the model of locally sourced school meals. This integrated delivery model reinforces food security, improves dietary diversity for schoolchildren and generates rural employment across the farming, transport and food processing sectors.

Multilateral cooperation also drives **evidence generation, adaptive learning and joint financing**. Joint operational research includes a randomized controlled trial of procurement models (WFP and World Bank 2024), national cost-benefit studies (Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025), and ongoing operational learning loops. Academic partnerships have further strengthened the investment case for integrated approaches.

By embedding programme delivery within national systems and maintaining close collaboration with the World Bank, UN agencies (notably the WFP, the ILO, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) and donors, Burundi is building a delivery ecosystem capable of scaling up and sustaining complex, multisectoral transitions.

III. Sustainability embedded in integrated financing strategies, efficiencies and return on investment

Financing for Burundi's integrated approach combines **national government contributions, bilateral and multilateral donor support, and technical assistance**

from international partners. The Government has committed itself to gradually increasing the national budget for school feeding programmes through the Finance Act, aiming to expand coverage from 24 to 50 per cent by 2027, and to 100 per cent by 2032. The financing of school meals has accordingly been embedded into the national budget and development frameworks, including “Vision 2040/2060” (School Meals Coalition, n.d.; WFP 2024b).

The **World Bank** provides substantial financing for the *Merankabandi* programme and the HGSM programme, while the **World Food Programme** supports programme design, implementation and technical delivery in relation to school meals, cash transfers and the area-based approach. Efforts are under way to **consolidate co-financing models** that progressively shift financial responsibility towards national systems while retaining multilateral support during the transition.

Importantly, Burundi's model has been **proven to be economically efficient**. As already discussed, the development of associations and the increase in farmers' income also have a direct effect on local economic development (WFP 2024c), and a national cost-benefit analysis estimates that every US dollar invested in school meals generates **returns of approximately US\$5.8** in lifetime human capital returns,¹ reflecting gains in terms of nutrition, education, local economic growth and poverty reduction (Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025).

These returns are achieved not only through long-term human capital development, but also through immediate economic stimulation. School meals and social protection transfers inject liquidity into rural economies, increase demand for locally produced goods and support the development of smallholder farmer associations and microenterprises.

Beyond macro-level returns, integrated financing also enhances programme coherence and delivery efficiency. Embedding school meals and cash-based assistance within national systems, supported by digital delivery platforms (such as the national social registry currently under development), reduces fragmentation and allows better coordination across funding sources. This is enabling Burundi to stretch its limited fiscal space more effectively,

¹ The estimated return on investment for the HGSM programme in Burundi reflects long-term benefits over a 40-year working life, discounted at 3 per cent annually. It combines projected gains in lifetime earnings from increased educational attainment (1.8 additional years on average) and monetized health improvements (such as reduced anaemia), using GDP per capita as a proxy for the value of a healthy life year.

ensuring that social protection and economic inclusion efforts reinforce rather than duplicate each other.

Burundi's integrated model also addresses social and economic fragility, reducing tension and competition over scarce resources between displaced and host communities and providing the foundations for durable solutions to forced displacement, particularly through the *Merankabandi* programme, which empowers vulnerable refugees and host households by stabilizing their incomes and enabling them to participate in local markets. This could prevent or mitigate potential damage to the local economy and ecosystems (as suggested by emerging evidence, such as that presented by Tefera Taye et al. 2024). Coupled with the HGSM initiative, which creates steady demand for locally produced food from farmer associations, this approach fosters economic interdependence and shared benefits between communities.

Looking forward, the Government is exploring **new financing pathways**, including:

- **public-private partnerships** to expand local procurement and agroprocessing linkages;
- linkages to community-based and contributory social insurance schemes over time;
- strengthened **alignment between public investment and humanitarian funding** for fragile and displacement-affected settings.

Together, these efforts mean that Burundi's integrated model is not only impactful and inclusive, but also **fiscally responsible and investment-worthy** – a model that can be scaled up sustainably with the right mix of national leadership, technical assistance and coordinated financing.

Impact and challenges

Impact

Burundi's integrated interventions are generating significant impacts on social protection, productive inclusion, human capital development and rural economic growth.

The Home-Grown School Meals programme has increased the share of local procurement to over 40 per cent of total food purchases in 2022, involving 63 farmer associations

that reported productivity gains of between 29 and 42 per cent and, in some cases, a doubling of their income (Bigirimana et al. 2024; Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025). If scaled up to cover the whole country, school meals are projected to create between 48,000 and 161,000 rural jobs, stimulating employment in rural areas and boosting rural GDP proxies such as local market activity (Verguet et al. 2020; WFP 2022).

Box 3. What is the commodity voucher model in social assistance?

In line with the long-term objective of expanding the Home-Grown School Meals programme and gradually transferring ownership and the management of operations to the Government of Burundi, the World Food Programme in October 2022 supported the National Directorate for School Canteens and provincial education directorates in piloting the "commodity voucher" model. Under this model, the World Food Programme channelled resources to the provincial governments so that these could source food locally from smallholder farmers. This has created structured demand and improved livelihoods and incomes for smallholder farmers.

A pilot randomized controlled trial conducted in 2023–24 confirmed that the commodity voucher model for local purchases (see box 3) significantly enhanced delivery performance and cost-efficiency (WFP and World Bank, 2024). Schools using this model delivered nearly twice as many school meal days on average than those without commodity vouchers (13 versus 7.4 days per month), while achieving a lower annual cost per child (US\$40.61 versus US\$46.85). The model also fostered direct market access

for local associations, reinforcing the structured demand link that is central to the HGSM approach.

The evaluation further found that, in nine out of 12 associations, almost all the revenue appeared to come from sales to schools. With an average annual revenue of US\$116,000 per farmer association, the structured market access enabled by this model is strengthening rural value chains, confirming the significant potential that school meals hold for local farmers and their associations (WFP

and World Bank 2024). School meals can thus not only improve nutrition and education outcomes, but also boost productivity and income in rural areas, reduce poverty, promote gender-responsive livelihoods (through women-led associations and village savings and loans associations), enhance the employment prospects of young people and contribute to the organization of agricultural workers into member-based organizations that can defend their interests and rights.

Cost-benefit analyses estimate that every US dollar invested in school meals generates US\$4.6–7.6 in multisectoral returns, encompassing social protection, nutrition, education and rural economic development (Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025). This is in line with global findings that suggest returns of US\$7–35 for every US dollar invested (WFP and World Bank 2024; Verguet et al. 2020).²²

The “cash plus” model of the *Merankabandi* programme contributes to immediate poverty reduction through consumption smoothing to meet immediate food needs, savings increases and microenterprise formation among vulnerable and refugee households (WFP 2024b; UNHCR 2025). In facilitating the integration of refugees into national economic systems, *Merankabandi* not only reduces inequality but also strengthens social cohesion by promoting shared economic opportunities, encouraging collaboration between refugees and host communities, and fostering mutual trust and support. This inclusive approach helps to break down social barriers and build trust, and it supports peaceful coexistence and community resilience.

The area-based approach further reinforces local resilience by geographically concentrating investments in school meals, productive inclusion and social protection, the aim being to promote the emergence of localized economic multipliers, strengthen climate resilience and empower young people, women and marginalized groups (WFP 2024b).

The success achieved so far as a result of Burundi's inclusive approach and political commitment suggests that, even in fragile settings, integrated interventions can build sustainable pathways towards poverty reduction, gender-responsive development, rural economic transformation and resilience to future shocks.

Challenges

While Burundi's integrated approach has yielded strong initial results, several operational and strategic challenges must be addressed if it is to fully realize its transformative potential.

At the operational level, sustaining livelihoods and productive inclusion impacts over time remains a core concern. Households benefiting from cash transfers and seed capital initiatives require continuous market linkages, timely access to quality agriculture inputs, technical support and risk management tools to prevent dependency or backsliding into extreme poverty during shocks (WFP 2024b). Similarly, ensuring the long-term capacity of farmer associations, schools and local governance structures to manage decentralized procurement and service delivery models through commodity vouchers calls for continued investment (WFP 2024c). This includes strengthening institutional capacities and ensuring that effective accountability mechanisms are in place.

The area-based approach requires robust cross-sectoral governance at the decentralized level. Although concentrating resources geographically can generate localized multiplier effects, it also risks leading to perceptions of exclusion among non-targeted communities if not managed sensitively. Effective community engagement and transparent communication strategies are therefore essential.

Embedding shock-responsiveness more deeply into social protection and productive inclusion interventions is crucial, particularly in view of Burundi's high exposure to climate risks and recurrent fragility. Building climate resilience across agricultural supply chains and vulnerable households remains an unfinished agenda. This implies that the integration of early warning systems and climate smart agricultural practices will need to be prioritized.

From a systemic perspective, while immediate impacts on rural livelihoods, education and nutrition are evident, broader ambitions have yet to be fulfilled as regards formalizing employment pathways, scaling up financial inclusion, linking to health insurance schemes (such as community-based health insurance) and other forms of contributory social insurance and mobilizing private sector partnerships. Gender equality, youth employment and

²² In 14 low- and middle-income countries (Botswana, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Chile, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Kenya, Mali, Mexico, Namibia, Nigeria and South Africa), school feeding programmes reaching 190 million children in total were found to generate annual returns of US\$210 billion – including US\$156 billion from education, US\$24 billion from health and nutrition gains, US\$7 billion in terms of social protection impact and US\$23 billion in gains to local agricultural economies – against an annual investment of US\$11 billion.

financial sustainability pathways must be integrated more explicitly into future programming to unlock the model's full potential.

At the political level, while the *Merankabandi* cash transfers are making a notable positive impact on the livelihoods of many Burundian and refugee households, there is still a question mark over the programme's long-term institutionalization. Government contributions to programme funding are still limited, and it has not yet been fully integrated with the broader social protection system. Broader consensus across the Government on the role and

value of unconditional cash transfers is still evolving, and planning for sustained national ownership is ongoing.

Finally, measurement and evidence gaps persist. While pilot evaluations have identified promising trends, more general longitudinal studies are necessary to rigorously capture impacts on child learning outcomes, household resilience, the empowerment of women, climate adaptation and rural economic growth. Strengthening monitoring, learning and adaptive management systems will be key to sustaining momentum and replicating success on a larger scale.

What next?

Despite the challenges discussed above, Burundi by virtue of its strong government leadership and integrated programming architecture is a promising pioneer of scalable social protection, productive inclusion and human capital development in fragile and displacement-affected settings. The next phase of the Government's efforts will focus on consolidating current initiatives while strengthening the links between them, thereby ensuring that social protection, locally sourced school meals and interventions to promote rural livelihoods are designed and implemented in a carefully sequenced and mutually reinforcing manner. The area-based approach offers a unique opportunity to operationalize such integration from the outset, building layered systems of support that enhance efficiency, resilience and long-term impact.

The immediate priorities are as follows:

- Scaling up social protection coverage:** Burundi's commitment to reaching 100 per cent of basic public schools by 2032 under the School Meals Coalition requires sustained investment in local food production (including timely access to quality agriculture inputs), storage and transport systems, the strengthening of rural cooperatives and decentralized governance mechanisms (School Meals Coalition, n.d.; WFP 2024c). Upscaling must be accompanied by the development of supply chains and local livelihoods to maximize synergies across interventions. In parallel, the coverage of the national cash transfer programme has to be gradually increased in order to reach those most in need. Expanding contributory social protection to agricultural workers involved in the Home-Grown School Meals programme is another promising avenue that will allow them to access
 - more decent and productive jobs while being protected from life-cycle risks such as ill health. Such an expansion of coverage would be in line with recently adopted regulations (February 2025) that make the medical assistance card mandatory for all households and individuals aged 18 years or over who do not have other health insurance coverage. This measure serves as a transitional step in the implementation of universal health coverage, which envisages, inter alia, the establishment of health insurance for informal workers.
- Applying the area-based approach more widely:** Implementation of the area-based approach in further parts of the country is essential to multiply localized economic impacts and ensure comprehensive rural development. The sequenced layering of school meals, cash transfers, nutrition and livelihood interventions will allow communities to move progressively from relief to resilience and inclusion (WFP 2024b).
- Embedding shock-responsiveness:** The development of risk-informed mechanisms within national cash transfer and school meals programmes is essential to safeguard the gains achieved against climate, market, health and conflict-related shocks. This includes disaster response protocols, triggers for anticipatory action, pre-positioned financing and use of the national social registry (currently under development) to support adaptive responses.
- Securing sustainable financing:** The expansion of co-financing strategies – leveraging multilateral

donor and private sector contributions and innovative financing instruments – is crucial to sustain and scale up integrated programming while reinforcing national ownership (School Meals Coalition, n.d.). With the support of the Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition, the Government is currently developing a sustainable financing strategy for its school meals programme.

- **Strengthening systems for measurement and learning:** The adoption of standardized indicators and digital data systems to support continuous adaptive learning will help to refine policies and strengthen the evidence base for cross-sectoral integration (Bigirimana et al. 2024; Government of Burundi, WFP and Harvard University 2025).

There are several opportunities that can be seized to expand the ambition and scope of Burundi's interventions in the areas discussed in this case study:

Strengthening refugee inclusion: Burundi can deepen the integration of refugee households into national systems by expanding their access to social protection, livelihood support and procurement opportunities linked to school meals and local food systems, fostering both resilience and social cohesion (WFP 2024b; UNHCR 2025).

Formalizing pathways to employment: Building on the foundations of rural livelihoods and productive inclusion, programming can evolve to include skills development,

entrepreneurship support, employment promotion and linkages to contributory social (health) protection, in particular for young people and women.

Linking to broader social protection mechanisms: The gradual integration of agricultural workers involved in the HGSM programme into contributory social protection schemes (notably for health protection), other insurance mechanisms (such as crop insurance) and micro-pension schemes will enhance long-term economic security and reduce reliance on basic assistance.

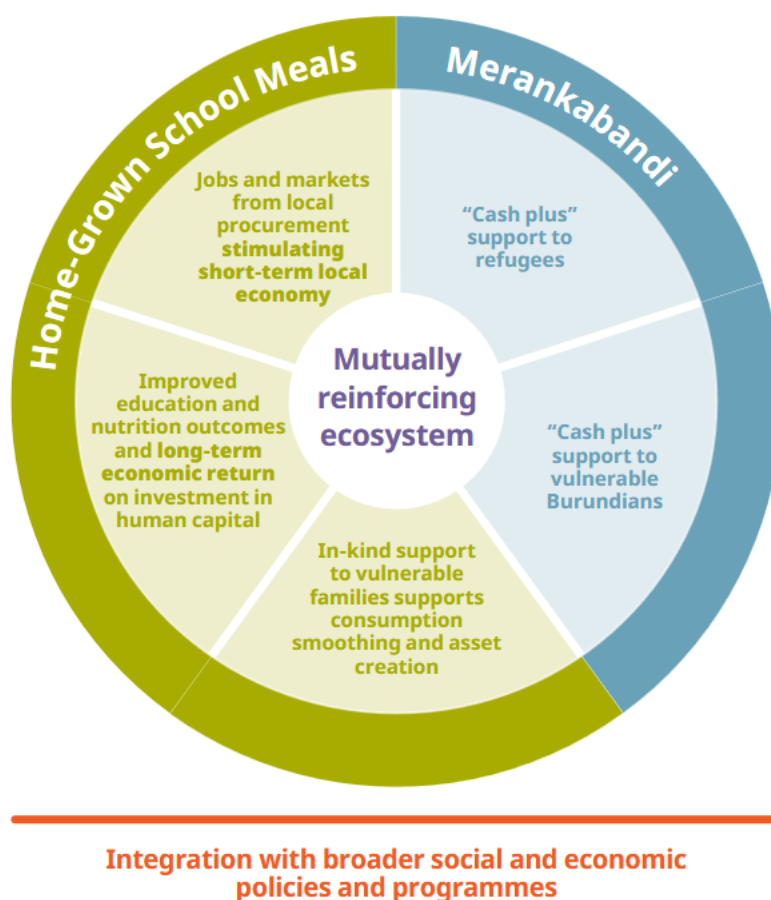
Strengthening coherence across sectors: Closer alignment with farmer associations, financial inclusion initiatives, agricultural value chains and private sector actors could help to improve the sustainability of local economic development and reduce fragmentation.

Building the investment case for cross-sectoral financing: Systematic documentation of the returns achieved in terms of human capital, economic productivity and social cohesion will support cross-sectoral financing and serve as an advocacy tool to mobilize investment in inclusive, integrated systems. The area-based approach is ideally suited to generate relevant insights in a coordinated manner.

Having laid the groundwork for stronger programmatic linkages and sequenced interventions in the future (see figure 2), Burundi's experience offers a blueprint for other countries in fragile settings that seek to combine immediate relief with long-term, inclusive economic development

Figure 2. Core components and reinforcing pathways of the integrated social protection model in Burundi

Integrated social protection in Burundi



Note: Anchored in the Home-Grown School Meals programme and the *Merankabandi* cash transfer programme, Burundi's approach supports immediate consumption smoothing, stimulates local economic activity and builds up long-term human capital. Integration with broader social and economic policies is pursued in order to sustain and expand these positive impacts systemically.

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