



Association des Femmes pour le Développement Durable

SUSTAINABLE, COMMUNITY-LED SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

*Integrating Clean Water, Agroecological School Gardens,
Vegetable Salad Days, Targeted Hygiene Promotion, and
Digital Nutrition Education (2020–2026)*

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ABSTRACT

School feeding programmes are increasingly recognised as important interventions for improving children's nutrition, educational participation, and community resilience. Between 2020 and 2026, the Association of Women for Sustainable Development (AFDD) implemented an integrated, community-led school feeding model in five rural public primary schools in the commune of Bimbo, Central African Republic. The programme combined access to safe water, agroecological school gardens, fresh vegetable meals through Vegetable Salad Days, targeted hygiene promotion, and digital nutrition education through the Nutriecole platform.

The programme reached 5,835 pupils across five participating schools and mobilised teachers, parents, community volunteers, and local stakeholders in the management of school gardens, water infrastructure, nutrition activities, and school-based health promotion. Across the five schools, AFDD established 325 agroecological vegetable plots, covering approximately 3,617 m² of cultivated land. Available monitoring data document more than 3 tonnes of vegetable production, including 1,751 kg harvested at Yambo during the documented 2024–2026 production cycle. Four boreholes and one improved well provided access to water for drinking, hygiene, food preparation, and agricultural activities.

Hygiene activities were implemented according to project and school context. Practical handwashing workshops were conducted at Nzilla and M'Poko Bac primary schools, while a dedicated oral hygiene campaign was implemented at Yambo Primary School in 2026. Digital nutrition education through Nutriecole was introduced at Yambo, reaching 215 pupils during the documented implementation period.

Programme monitoring and field observations indicate increased participation in school nutrition and hygiene activities, strengthened community involvement, and improved opportunities for pupils to access locally produced vegetables and nutrition education. The AFDD experience suggests that integrating agriculture, water, nutrition, hygiene, and education within a community ownership framework can contribute to more sustainable school feeding systems in fragile and low-resource settings.

Keywords: school feeding; agroecology; school gardens; vegetable consumption; safe water; hygiene promotion; oral health; nutrition education; community participation; Central African Republic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Central African Republic continues to face significant challenges related to food insecurity, child nutrition, access to safe water, and educational infrastructure. Rural communities and schools are particularly vulnerable to these interconnected challenges. Inadequate access to nutritious foods, limited water infrastructure, and insufficient hygiene facilities can negatively affect children's health, school participation, concentration, and learning environment.

Recognising the interconnection between nutrition, agriculture, water, hygiene, and education, the Association of Women for Sustainable Development (AFDD) developed an integrated, community-led school feeding approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on food distribution, the model seeks to strengthen schools' capacity to produce nutritious vegetables locally, improve access to water, promote healthy practices, and provide children with practical nutrition education.

The intervention was progressively implemented in five rural public primary schools in the commune of Bimbo:

Table 1: Schools

Year	Schools
2021	Yombo and Sékia-Dalet
2022	Nzilla and M'Poko Bac
2024	Yamboro

Together, the five schools enrolled approximately 5,835 pupils, who benefited directly or indirectly from different components of AFDD's interventions between 2020 and 2026.

1.1 AFDD's Integrated School Feeding Model

The programme was organised around five complementary components:

1. Safe water access through boreholes and an improved well.
2. Agroecological school gardens producing locally adapted vegetables.
3. Vegetable Salad Days, using freshly harvested vegetables in school meals.
4. Digital nutrition education through the Nutriecole platform.
5. Targeted hygiene and health promotion, including handwashing workshops in Nzilla and M'Poko Bac and oral hygiene education at Yamboro in 2026.

The model was designed to address immediate nutritional needs while simultaneously strengthening local food production, health awareness, community participation, and school resilience.

2. METHODS

2.1 Study Design

This paper presents a descriptive analysis of AFDD's integrated school feeding programme implemented between January 2020 and September 2026 in five rural public primary schools in the commune of Bimbo, Central African Republic.

The analysis describes programme activities, outputs, and field observations rather than presenting a controlled impact evaluation. Consequently, reported changes in behaviour or participation are interpreted as programme observations rather than statistically measured causal effects.

2.2 Data Sources

Programme information was compiled from AFDD implementation and project reports, including:

- School Gardens and Nutrition Project Final Report (2022–2023);
- AFDD School Gardens Project Report (2020–2022);
- PRA/OSIM Yamboro Final Report (2024–2025);
- school and programme monitoring records available through September 2026.

2.3 Data Collection

Programme monitoring information was collected through:

- school enrolment records;
- school garden production records;
- infrastructure monitoring forms;
- training and activity attendance records;
- field observation visits;
- community feedback meetings;
- project implementation reports.

2.4 Indicators

The analysis focused on five principal domains:

Table 2: Indicators

Domain	Main indicators
Water access	Number and functionality of water points
Agroecology	Number of plots, cultivated area, and vegetable production
School feeding	Vegetable Salad Days and pupils reached
Nutrition education	Pupils participating in Nutriecole activities
Hygiene and health promotion	Handwashing and oral hygiene activities implemented by school

Quantitative programme data were complemented by qualitative observations concerning community participation, pupil engagement, and the school learning environment.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Improved Access to Safe Water

Access to water was a foundational component of the programme. AFDD installed four boreholes and rehabilitated one improved well where geological conditions prevented borehole installation.



Figure 1: Borehole school Nzilla

Table 3: Water Infrastructure in Participating Schools

School	Water infrastructure	Status in 2026
Yombo	Improved well	Functional
Sékia-Dalet	Borehole	Functional
Nzilla	Borehole	Functional
M'Poko Bac	Borehole	Functional
Yamboro	Borehole	Functional

The water infrastructure supported several programme activities, including:

- access to water for drinking;
- handwashing and hygiene activities;
- preparation of fresh meals;
- watering and maintenance of school gardens;
- improved environmental hygiene around school facilities.

At Yombo, an improved well was used instead of a borehole because of local geological constraints.

3.2 Agroecological School Gardens

AFDD established 325 agroecological vegetable plots across the five participating schools, covering approximately 3,617 m² of cultivated land.

The school gardens promoted locally adapted agricultural practices, including the use of local seeds, composting, crop rotation, and organic approaches to pest management. The gardens served both nutritional and educational purposes by providing vegetables for school meals while giving pupils, teachers, parents, and community members opportunities to engage in practical food production.



Figure 2: School Garden M'Poko Bac

Table 4 : School Garden Infrastructure and Vegetable Production, 2021–2026

School	Vegetable plots	Cultivated area (m ²)	Documented harvest
Yombo	68	816	Qualitative monitoring
Sékia-Dalet	99	1,188	Qualitative monitoring
Nzilla	44	449	Qualitative monitoring
M'Poko Bac	19	194	Qualitative monitoring
Yamgoro	97	970	1,751 kg
Total	325	3,617	More than 3 tonnes documented

Yamgoro had the largest documented quantitative harvest, producing **1,751 kg of vegetables** during the documented 2024–2026 production cycle.

Vegetables produced included amaranth, tomato, eggplant, okra, cabbage, spinach, pepper, and other locally consumed leafy vegetables.

The gardens contributed to:

- increasing the local availability of vegetables;
- supplying ingredients for school meals;
- providing practical learning opportunities;
- strengthening nutrition education;
- promoting agroecological practices;
- increasing participation by parents and community volunteers.

3.3 Vegetable Salad Days

AFDD introduced Vegetable Salad Days as a practical component of the school feeding programme. During these activities, freshly harvested vegetables were incorporated into meals prepared for pupils with the participation of parents, teachers, and community volunteers.

The activity created a direct link between school gardens, local food production, nutrition education, and school meals.



Figure 3: Vegetable Salad Day School Yamgoro

Table 5: Expansion of Vegetable Salad Days, 2023–2026

Year	Participating schools	Estimated pupils reached
2023	2	≈600
2024	2	≈900
2025	3	≈1,500
2026	5	≈3,000

By 2026, Vegetable Salad Days had expanded to all five participating schools, reaching approximately 3,000 pupils.

Field observations associated with the activity indicated:

- increased opportunities for children to consume vegetables;
- greater diversity of foods incorporated into school meals;
- stronger links between school gardens and school feeding;
- increased involvement of parents and community volunteers.

Vegetable Salad Days also provided an opportunity to reinforce messages about balanced diets and the importance of consuming locally available vegetables.

3.4 Digital Nutrition Education: Nutriecole app

AFDD introduced the Nutriecole digital nutrition education platform at Yamboro Primary School during the 2024–2025 implementation period.

Table 6: Nutrition Education by Nutriecole App

School	Pupils documented as participating
Yamboro	215
Other participating schools	Expansion planned in 2026

Nutriecole provided educational content on:

- food groups;
- balanced diets;
- micronutrients;
- healthy eating habits;
- hygiene and food safety.

The digital approach complemented practical activities such as the school garden and Vegetable Salad Days by connecting classroom learning with children's everyday food environment.

Teachers reported strong pupil participation and interest in nutrition-related learning activities.



Figure 4: Nutrition education School Yamboro

3.5 Hygiene Promotion and Oral Health

Hygiene and oral health promotion were implemented through targeted activities that differed according to the school and project context. Importantly, handwashing workshops and oral hygiene education were not implemented in all five schools.

3.5.1 Handwashing Workshops at Nzilla and M'Poko Bac

AFDD conducted practical handwashing workshops at Nzilla and M'Poko Bac primary schools.

The workshops focused on:

- proper handwashing with soap;
- washing hands before eating;
- washing hands after using latrines;
- safe water practices;
- the role of hand hygiene in preventing infectious diseases.

The activities used practical demonstrations to help pupils understand when and how to wash their hands correctly. Teachers supported the reinforcement of hygiene messages during school activities.

These workshops complemented the broader water and nutrition interventions implemented at the two schools.



Figure 5: Bucket with spigot

3.5.2 Oral Hygiene Campaign at Yamboro Primary School, 2026

In 2026, AFDD organised a dedicated oral hygiene campaign at Yamboro Primary School as part of the PRA/OSIM project.

Unlike the handwashing workshops at Nzilla and M'Poko Bac, this activity focused specifically on oral health.

The campaign included:

- demonstrations of correct tooth-brushing techniques;
- education on the importance of regular tooth brushing;
- awareness of the relationship between oral health, nutrition, and general well-being;
- participation of pupils and members of the school community.

The campaign complemented the Vegetable Salad Days and Nutriecole activities by placing oral health within a broader approach to child nutrition and preventive health.



Figure 6: Oral Hygiene Awareness Campaign at Yamboro Primary School, 2026

AFDD oral hygiene awareness activity at Yamboro Primary School, Bimbo Commune, Central African Republic, 2026. The activity promoted preventive oral health practices among pupils and members of the school community.



Figure 7: Tooth-Brushing Education Session at Yamboro Primary School, 2026

A pupil participates in an AFDD oral hygiene education session at Yamboro Primary School in 2026, demonstrating correct tooth-brushing techniques.

Field observations indicated strong participation by pupils during the oral hygiene activities. The campaign provided an opportunity to introduce practical preventive health messages and to reinforce the relationship between oral health, nutrition, hygiene, and children's overall well-being.

3.6 Hygiene and Health Activities by School

To ensure accurate documentation of the programme, hygiene activities are summarised below according to the schools in which they were actually implemented.

Table 7: Hygiene and Oral Health Activities by School

School	Handwashing workshop	Oral hygiene education
Yombo	—	—
Sékia-Dalet	—	—
Nzilla	Yes	—
M'Poko Bac	Yes	—
Yamboro	—	Yes, 2026

This school-specific approach is important because the hygiene component was implemented through different project activities rather than as a uniform intervention across all five schools.

3.7 Community Participation

Community ownership was a central feature of AFDD's implementation model.

Parents, teachers, women's groups, community volunteers, and local stakeholders contributed to activities such as:

- establishing and maintaining school gardens;
- watering and protecting crops;
- participating in Vegetable Salad Days;
- preparing and serving fresh vegetable meals;
- supporting school-based nutrition activities;
- participating in hygiene and health promotion;
- contributing to the maintenance and monitoring of water infrastructure.

The participation of community members helped connect school-based activities with household and community practices.

3.8. Programme Evaluation Across the Five Schools

Evaluation findings were compiled from the monitoring and evaluation activities conducted across the five participating primary schools. Because the interventions were implemented at different times and evaluated using different approaches, the results are presented as complementary evidence rather than as a single standardized impact evaluation. The main evaluation sources were the 2022 final evaluation of Nzilla and M'Poko Bac, implementation monitoring from Yombo and Sékia-Dalet, and the impact assessment conducted at Yamboro.

At Nzilla and M'Poko Bac, the final evaluation was conducted on 28 February 2022, with a field verification visit on 5 March 2022. The evaluation combined direct observation, review of project documents, and interviews with pupils, teachers, and representatives of parent associations. Indicators included pupil enrolment, water infrastructure, participation in agroecology training, assimilation of agroecological techniques, agricultural equipment, school garden beds, vegetable production, and composting.

A total of 60 people participated in agroecology training, with 30 participants from each of the two schools. The assessment indicated different levels of assimilation of agroecological techniques among pupils: 10% were assessed as having very good assimilation, while 40% were considered to have assimilated the techniques well. Approximately 30% had not yet adequately understood the techniques, highlighting the need for continued practical training and follow-up.

The evaluation also documented differences in water infrastructure between the two schools. The borehole at Nzilla was functional and well maintained, with a full-time pump operator employed by the school. At M'Poko Bac, the borehole had been completed but was not yet operational at the time of the final assessment. The number of pupils increased at Nzilla between the beginning and end of the project; the project report suggested that the improved school environment, including access to the borehole, may have contributed to this change. However, this association should not be interpreted as a causal effect because the evaluation did not use a control group.

At Yombo and Sékia-Dalet, monitoring focused primarily on implementation achievements, including school gardening, water access, vegetable production, and community participation. Yombo was equipped with an improved well because geological conditions prevented the installation of a borehole, while Sékia-Dalet received a borehole. Both schools developed agroecological gardens, contributing to the programme's food-production component.

At Yamboro, a separate impact assessment examined access to drinking water, perceived health improvements, and the school food situation. The assessment indicated that the majority of respondents reported access to safe drinking water either "always" or "often" following installation of the borehole. Respondents also reported improvements in perceived water quality, and several participants reported a decrease in water-related illnesses. These findings should be interpreted cautiously because the

assessment was descriptive and based on respondents' perceptions rather than on controlled epidemiological measurements.

The Yamboro assessment also indicated an improvement in access to school meals compared with the situation before the intervention. However, meals were not necessarily provided every day, and respondents identified the regularity and diversity of school meals as areas requiring further improvement. These findings are consistent with the broader programme experience, which indicates that increasing local food production does not automatically guarantee regular and nutritionally adequate school meals.

Across the five schools, the evaluation and monitoring evidence therefore points to several common achievements: improved access to school water infrastructure, strengthened agroecological knowledge and school gardening, increased local availability of vegetables, and greater involvement of pupils, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders. At the same time, the assessments identified important sustainability challenges, particularly the maintenance and functionality of water infrastructure, the continuity of school meals, the diversification of food, and the need for continued practical support in agroecology.

The evidence should nevertheless be interpreted within the methodological limitations of the programme. The five schools were not evaluated using an identical baseline–endline design, and no control schools were included. Some findings are based on routine monitoring or respondents' perceptions rather than standardized quantitative measurements. Consequently, the results demonstrate programme achievements and perceived changes, but they do not establish causal effects on nutritional status, morbidity, school attendance, or learning outcomes.

Overall, the combined evaluation evidence supports the relevance of an integrated, community-led approach that links safe water, agroecological school gardens, vegetable-based school meals, nutrition education, and targeted hygiene promotion. The findings also suggest that future programme cycles would benefit from standardized baseline and endline indicators across all schools, including dietary diversity, meal frequency, water functionality, hygiene practices, attendance, and selected child nutrition indicators.

4. DISCUSSION

The AFDD experience illustrates the potential value of an integrated approach to school feeding in a fragile and low-resource context. Rather than treating school feeding as the provision of food alone, the programme linked local food production, safe water, nutrition education, school meals, hygiene promotion, and community participation.

One of the main strengths of the model was the connection between school gardens and school meals. Agroecological gardens created an opportunity to produce locally available vegetables while providing a practical educational environment. Vegetable Salad Days then created a direct pathway from agricultural production to children's meals.

This approach is particularly relevant in settings where access to diverse foods can be constrained by household poverty, seasonal availability, and weaknesses in local food systems.

4.1 Water as a Foundation for Integrated School Nutrition

The installation and rehabilitation of water points strengthened several components of the programme simultaneously. Water was required not only for drinking and hygiene but also for food preparation and garden maintenance.

The experience at Yombo also illustrates the importance of adapting infrastructure solutions to local environmental conditions. Where geological conditions prevented borehole installation, an improved well provided an alternative source of water.

4.2 School Gardens as Nutrition and Learning Platforms

The establishment of 325 vegetable plots demonstrates the potential for schools to become practical spaces for food production and nutrition learning.

The gardens served multiple purposes:

- food production;
- practical agricultural education;
- nutrition education;
- community mobilisation;
- support for school feeding.

The documented 1,751 kg harvest at Yamboro demonstrates the potential production capacity of school-based agroecological activities, although production data were not available in the same quantitative form for all schools.

4.3 Vegetable Salad Days and Dietary Diversity

Vegetable Salad Days provided a practical mechanism for connecting local agricultural production with school feeding.

The progressive expansion from two participating schools in 2023 to all five schools in 2026 suggests increasing programme reach. The activity also strengthened the role of parents and community volunteers in preparing and supporting school meals.

However, because the available monitoring data do not include standardised dietary intake measurements, changes in children's dietary diversity should be interpreted as programme observations rather than formally measured nutritional outcomes.

4.4 Targeted Hygiene and Oral Health Promotion

The programme demonstrates the importance of documenting hygiene activities according to their actual implementation sites.

At Nzilla and M'Poko Bac, AFDD conducted practical handwashing workshops focusing on personal hygiene and disease prevention.

At Yamboro, the 2026 intervention focused specifically on oral health and tooth-brushing education.

The integration of oral hygiene into a broader nutrition programme is particularly relevant because oral health can influence children's ability to eat comfortably and may affect general well-being and school participation. Combining nutrition education with preventive oral health education can therefore contribute to a more comprehensive approach to child health.

Nevertheless, the Yamboro oral hygiene campaign should be understood as a targeted health promotion activity rather than evidence of a school-wide oral health intervention across all five participating schools.

4.5 Community Ownership and Sustainability

Community participation was a recurring feature of programme implementation. Parents and community volunteers contributed labour, knowledge, supervision, and support to school gardens, meals, water management, and health promotion activities.

Such participation can strengthen programme sustainability by increasing local responsibility for infrastructure and activities after the end of external project support.

5. CHALLENGES

Implementation encountered several operational constraints.

5.1 Geological Constraints

At Yombo, geological conditions prevented the installation of a borehole. AFDD therefore used an improved well as an alternative water source.

5.2 Seasonal Water Availability

Seasonal variations in water availability created additional challenges for maintaining school gardens, particularly during prolonged dry periods.

5.3 Agricultural Costs

Increasing costs of agricultural inputs created constraints for maintaining and expanding school garden production.

5.4 Protection of School Gardens

Theft or unauthorised harvesting of vegetables presented challenges in protecting school garden production.

5.5 Logistics

Infrastructure implementation and project activities were sometimes affected by logistical delays. Community monitoring and adaptive management were used to address these constraints where possible.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

Five principal lessons emerged from the AFDD experience.

1. Safe water is a foundational component of sustainable school feeding.

Water infrastructure supports not only drinking and hygiene but also food preparation and school garden production.

2. Agroecological school gardens can serve both nutritional and educational purposes.

Gardens can increase access to locally produced vegetables while providing practical opportunities for children and communities to learn about food production and healthy diets.

3. Vegetable Salad Days can create a direct connection between local production and school meals.

Linking garden production with school feeding helps make nutrition education practical and visible to pupils.

4. Hygiene interventions should be adapted to the local programme context.

The AFDD experience demonstrates the value of targeted activities: handwashing workshops were implemented at Nzilla and M'Poko Bac, while oral hygiene education was conducted at Yamboro in 2026.

5. Community ownership is critical for programme continuity.

The involvement of parents, teachers, women's groups, and community volunteers can strengthen local responsibility for school gardens, water infrastructure, meals, and health promotion activities.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR SCALING

- ❖ The AFDD model offers several elements that could be adapted for other rural and fragile settings.
- ❖ First, school feeding programmes can build greater resilience when they connect food provision with local agricultural production.
- ❖ Second, school gardens can be used as practical learning environments rather than solely as food production sites.
- ❖ Third, water infrastructure should be considered an integral component of school nutrition programming rather than a separate intervention.
- ❖ Fourth, targeted hygiene and health activities can be incorporated according to the specific needs and resources of individual schools.
- ❖ Finally, community participation should be established from the beginning of implementation to support local ownership and continuity.
- ❖ Future programme development would benefit from more standardised monitoring of dietary diversity, quantities of vegetables consumed by pupils, attendance, and nutrition and health outcomes. Such data would strengthen the evidence base for evaluating and scaling the model.

8. CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2026, the Association of Women for Sustainable Development developed a community-led school feeding model benefiting **5,835 pupils across five rural public primary schools in Bimbo, Central African Republic.**

The programme combined:

- safe water infrastructure;
- agroecological school gardens;
- locally produced vegetables;
- Vegetable Salad Days;
- digital nutrition education through Nutriecole;
- targeted handwashing workshops;
- oral hygiene education at Yamboro in 2026;
- community participation.

The establishment of 325 vegetable plots covering approximately 3,617 m² demonstrates the potential of school-based agriculture to complement school feeding. The documented production of more than three tonnes of vegetables, including 1,751 kg at Yamboro, illustrates the contribution that locally managed school gardens can make to food availability.

The experience also demonstrates that school feeding can serve as a platform for broader health and nutrition promotion. By combining food production, water access, nutrition education, targeted hygiene

activities, and community engagement, AFDD created an integrated approach that goes beyond food provision alone.

The AFDD model offers a practical framework that could be adapted and further evaluated in other fragile and low-resource settings in Africa. Future implementation should strengthen standardised monitoring of dietary intake, nutritional outcomes, school attendance, and behavioural changes in order to generate stronger evidence on programme effectiveness and scalability.

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