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Beyond global rankings: Benchmarking public food procurement

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Beyond global rankings: Benchmarking public food procurement

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Beyond global rankings: benchmarking public food procurement

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BEYOND GLOBAL RANKINGS: BENCHMARKING PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT¹

Ana Miranda and Israel Klug

1 INTRODUCTION

International benchmarking is an evaluation that involves the application of comparative metrics to assess and monitor countries' performance in terms of governance structure and processes, and policy outcomes (Golinelli 2016). This approach has been widely used by governments and international institutions on a variety of issues such as human rights, competitiveness, environmental protection and poverty reduction. The rapid expansion of these assessments has, however, led to more robust analyses highlighting several methodological weaknesses and political implications. Many critics have pointed to the challenge of creating standardised measures and using quantification to assess multifaceted issues where context and history play a crucial role (Malito and Umbach 2015; Davies et al. 2012). Others have demonstrated that seemingly neutral and technical benchmarking methodologies are in fact used to advance particular political agendas and interests, and create unhelpful hierarchies that separate countries into those that perform well and those that fail (Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018; Broome and Quirk 2015).

We argue that, despite these valid criticisms, benchmarking can be an effective evaluation tool. Benchmarks can provide a framework to inform debates and decisions around development policies and programmes. This is of particular importance given the complexity of most policymaking processes and the need for reliable evidence. We accept that generating rankings and merely comparing countries will not help stakeholders to identify strategies to improve policy performance. However, benchmarking can instead focus on the process of finding performance gaps and how to achieve a benchmark. This approach privileges reflection, dialogue and collaboration which enable the adoption of tailored and effective strategies to improve outcomes. When benchmarking is also guided by the principles of broad-based participation, it can embed active stakeholder engagement, collective learning and innovation into evaluation and policymaking.

This article presents the Public Food Procurement (PFP) Benchmarking methodology created by the authors and applied to five PFP programmes in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. PFP is used by many governments to achieve socio-economic goals such as food security, better nutrition and agricultural growth. In many low- and middle-income countries PFP is often used as a strategy to provide smallholder farmers with

1. Israel Klug and Ana Miranda (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations—FAO). The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of FAO, the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

market opportunities. Market access and a source of income can strengthen rural livelihoods, contributing to poverty reduction and higher welfare in vulnerable communities (Miranda and Klug 2018). PFP Benchmarking assesses countries against a set of international best practices to integrate smallholder market participation, food security and nutrition outcomes.

The narrative presented demonstrates how PFP Benchmarking provides countries with a useful evaluation approach to develop their PFP programmes and policies. We will demonstrate how a standardised analytical framework facilitates reflection around performance gaps and strategies to tackle difficult implementation challenges. We will also highlight how PFP Benchmarking is able to stimulate active and broad-based stakeholder participation in the assessment in a way that is inclusive of diverse perspectives. Finally, we will show that the PFP Benchmarking process fosters collective learning both within and among countries, thus supporting better policy outcomes. The analysis is based on the authors' reflections on the methodology, its application in the four pilot countries and key debates in the international benchmarking literature.

This paper is organised as follows: the first part will introduce the conceptual and methodological issues raised in the international benchmarking literature. The following sections will present the PFP Benchmarking evaluation framework, demonstrating how it addresses these key concerns. The final part will discuss lessons learned and subsequent improvements in the PFP Benchmarking methodology.

2 INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKING: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concept of benchmarking was first introduced in the private sector when Xerox used benchmarking to enhance the efficiency and productivity of its warehousing operations (Camp 1993). It has since grown into a widely adopted methodology used by businesses in all parts of the world to improve their performance (Yasin 2002; Anand and Kodali 2008). Governments have also used benchmarking to achieve better results in public service delivery and public procurement (Triantafyllou 2007; Raymond 2008; Breakspear 2012).

There has also been an expansion, albeit more recently, in the number of international benchmarking approaches that aim to compare countries' institutional and policy design features across a number of areas. These range from the economic environment to poverty reduction, climate change action, human rights and corruption. According to the Global Benchmarking Database, a total of 200 new global benchmarks were created between 2000 and 2015 (Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018). Broome and Quirk (2015) classify three different types of international benchmarking: (1) assessing the performance of national actors in specific areas; (2) evaluating the quality of the national policy, legal and institutional framework; and (3) determining the level of achievement of predefined targets and goals.

International benchmarking is normally carried out by a wide variety of international actors such as international organisations (e.g. the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations), profit-based institutions, civil society organisations, think tanks and universities (Global Benchmarking Database, v1.9). In most cases, however, international benchmarking is a process that involves partnerships between different actors. Typically, the results of international benchmarking evaluations are expressed

as scores, rankings or indexes that classify countries both against a benchmark and in relation to one another. Table 1 provides examples of international benchmarking methodologies that have been applied to over 100 countries.

TABLE 1. International benchmarking methodologies applied to over 100 countries

Area	Benchmarking	Organisation
Human development	Human Development Index (HDI)	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
	Gender Development Index	UNDP
	Gini Index	World Bank
	Global Food Index	Oxfam
Economic environment	Country Risk Classification	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
	Competitive Industrial Performance Index	United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
	Ease of Doing Business (EDB)	World Bank
	Global Competitiveness Index	World Economic Forum
Political environment	Democracy Index	Economist Intelligence Unit
	Freedom in the World	Freedom House
	Corruption Perception Index	Transparency International
Environment protection and climate change	Ecological Footprint	World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)
	Environmental Vulnerability Index	South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
	Environmental Performance Index	Centre for International Science Information Network (University of Columbia) and Centre for Environmental Law and Policy (Yale University)
Public procurement	Benchmarking Public Procurement	World Bank
	Methodology for Assessing Procurement Systems (MAPS)	OECD

Source: Global Benchmarking Database, v1.9. <<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/csgr/benchmarking/database>>.

International benchmarking has a number of benefits over other forms of benchmarking. Globalisation has strengthened interdependency among countries. The development of one nation thus depends increasingly on the development of others. Moreover, government policy, especially development interventions, can only be benchmarked against other countries' policies or international standards.

The expansion of international benchmarking can also be attributed to its quantitative nature. Benchmarks provide a means for quantification and comparison of complex social and economic concepts. It also enables the definition and monitoring of targets and goals for challenging issues where collective action among countries is essential, such as climate change and poverty reduction. One of the most notable examples of this are the Sustainable Development Goals, which define global targets related to poverty, inequality, environmental protection, peace and justice. The goals call for action by all countries regardless of their development level.

The spread of international benchmarking has been accompanied by several criticisms, which highlight either its political implications or its methodological shortcomings (Broome, Homolar, and Kranke 2018; Harrison and Sekalala 2015; Homolar 2015; Sending and Lie 2015). The need to create benchmarks that can be translated into numerical form can favour more general standards and lead to the oversimplification of multifaceted social phenomena. Critics have indeed challenged the ability of benchmarking to operationalise development concepts and ideas in valid, representative and reliable indicators (Davies et al. 2012; Malito and Umbach 2015). There are also issues regarding data comparability, as definitions and measurement methods can vary across countries.

The notion of best practice has also been contested, especially in regard to universally applicable practices (Rodrik 2008; Francis and Holloway 2007). Factors such as cultures, histories, organisational structures and priorities can influence the applicability of best practice. Furthermore, most research on best practice does not explore the organisational background which engendered it in the first place (Francis and Holloway 2007). The context in which a practice has been successful is thus key to its replicability. Finally, the majority of the evidence linking best practice to superior performance is based on case studies and other qualitative research. Although some empirical evidence exists, this type of investigation is still limited in benchmarking literature (Davies and Kochhar 2002).

International benchmarking can also have political ramifications. Performance metrics are by their very nature normative and establish strict parameters for conduct and performance. They point not only to how things should be—i.e. outcomes and goals—but also how countries should pursue them. The representation of benchmarking results creates categories of actors—i.e. who is performing well and who is failing—producing hierarchies which frequently ignore differences in context, culture and history. Most importantly perhaps, it determines who should be dictating benchmarks and how countries should achieve them.

As highlighted by Broome and Quirk (2015), although international benchmarking is allegedly an objective and neutral evaluation, in reality it also entails a range of political motivations, agendas and ideologies. The limited conceptual and methodological work done around international benchmarking creates room for power relations to influence its nature and application. Furthermore, a country's development level is influenced by global structural factors (e.g. international trade rules, foreign direct investment flows and technological change) and external shocks (e.g. financial crises, environmental disasters). These factors are often left out of international benchmarking evaluations, making national actors entirely responsible for development outcomes (Broome and Quirk 2015). This is particularly problematic given that donors and international lending institutions are increasingly using benchmarking in resource allocation decisions (Sending and Lie 2015).

Although these critiques offer important insights into international benchmarking, the flaws explored in the literature should not be considered inescapable. Power relations between actors are complex and cannot be reduced to those who are governed and those who govern. International benchmarks have been frequently contested and, in many cases, have led to methodological changes or the creation of alternative standards (Davies et al. 2012). Many authors have highlighted ways in which international benchmarking can be effectively used to assist stakeholders to promote change and improve welfare in society (Malito and Umbach 2015; Golinelli 2016; Seabrooke and Wigan 2015).

First, there are important pragmatic considerations. Given the complexity of economies and social phenomena, generalisation and standardisation are perhaps a necessary aspect of knowledge production. They help to create more easily understandable and coherent frameworks to inform policymaking. Consistent frameworks are particularly important in the development field, where there is still limited scientific consensus on many issues, and theories often diverge on the reasons why some countries perform better than others.

To a certain extent quantification is still considered a more credible and reliable approach (Davies et al. 2012; Golinelli 2016). Measuring non-economic factors can help give other important aspects of human development more prominence in policymaking processes and political debates. Quantitative measures have been widely adopted to assess dimensions of people's well-being that are difficult to quantify, such as religious and political freedom and gender equity. This has helped to shift attention away from traditional economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP), and given these elements more weight in human development assessments. The 2019 Human Development Index, for example, measures different dimensions of inequality beyond income disparities, to consider social and political aspects that also influence people's unequal status.

Porter (2015) emphasises the importance of the context in which benchmarking is carried out. Benchmarking is effective at addressing public policy problems and the public interest when it promotes the flow of information among a wide range of actors, more active participation by them and deliberate efforts to reform existing practices and structures. This requires the benchmarking process to be supported by a network of various stakeholders. In this context benchmarking can mobilise a large number and variety of actors to reflect on their practices, assess their progress towards a benchmark and consider ways in which benchmarks can be met. This process fosters accountability, collective learning and more transparent and participatory governance systems.

When international benchmarking is guided by principles of participation, transparency and accountability, it is more likely to achieve results that promote higher welfare in society (Porter 2015). A number of international benchmarking evaluations involve a wide range of actors, including civil society, in the selection of benchmarks, data collection and analysis and evidence use. This type of approach has proved successful at raising awareness, strengthening civil society participation in debates and agendas and spurring action among governments (Malito and Umbach 2015; Porter 2015; Golinelli 2016; Seabrooke and Wigan 2015).

In fact, the move to a more horizontal and collaborative type of benchmarking can also be observed in the private sector. Companies are increasingly working together to share information and learn about best practices (Elnathan et al. 1996; Simatupang and Sridharan 2004). The literature on private-sector benchmarking also highlights the role it can play in stimulating innovation, when organisations recognise the value of new information and ideas and apply them to improve their practices and procedures (Castro and Frazzon 2017).

It is also important to note that in many cases international benchmarking focuses solely on measuring outcomes. They compare and rank countries' performance, as opposed to assessing the practices that lead to better results. In other words, they do not aim to identify links between processes and features and superior performance. Of the 16 international benchmarking evaluations mentioned above, 12 assess countries' outcomes, and only 4 (Freedom in the World, Benchmarking Public Procurement, MAPS and EDB) entail benchmarking of best practice. Malito and Umbach (2015) show that in international governance benchmarking most

evaluations have focused on measuring governance in terms of tangible results and do not explore elements related to how good governance is implemented.

Although it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of international benchmarking methodologies, the examples indicate that many of these approaches have not always used benchmarking as a way to identify and implement effective practices that lead to better outcomes. While having knowledge of the differences in performance can be an incentive for change, knowing a country's ranking does not help stakeholders understand how better performers achieved results (Francis and Holloway 2007).

The added value of best practice benchmarking is that it enables actors to understand how other countries have improved their performance, and identify similar strategies and adaptations that can work for them. It is thus essential for the benchmarking process to go beyond scores and rankings and also point to effective and feasible ways in which countries can improve their practices and achieve better outcomes. If best practice benchmarking also involves broad and active participation from stakeholders, it can lead not only to outcomes that are legitimate and in the interest of society, but also innovative and alternative ways to tackle difficult challenges (Porter 2015).

Both the rapid growth of international benchmarking and its potential to act as a positive influence on policy processes demand efforts to improve these methodologies through continuous research and experimentation. The following sections in this article will explore the PFP Benchmarking approach and present its goals, scope, features and process. The discussion will demonstrate its methodological and conceptual strengths, and its potential to foster collective learning and better policy outcomes.

3 BENCHMARKING PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT FROM SMALLHOLDER FARMERS: AN APPROACH TO PROMOTE COLLECTIVE LEARNING AND INNOVATION AMONG COUNTRIES

PFP Benchmarking assesses countries against a set of international best practices to strengthen smallholder livelihoods and promote food security and better nutrition in vulnerable communities. It draws on the benchmarking methodologies developed by the World Bank and the OECD to evaluate public procurement systems. In a similar vein to these approaches, PFP Benchmarking provides countries with a tool to identify areas for improvement and strategies that can lead to better performance. The focus is on identifying how to achieve desired outcomes, instead of simply measuring results. Importantly, it provides a set of evidence-based best practices to inform this process. Another key innovation in PFP Benchmarking is its focus on active stakeholder engagement and collective knowledge production. The main motivation behind the approach is to create a knowledge base to improve policymaking, promote learning and foster positive change in practices and discourses.

3.1 PFP BENCHMARKING: DEFINING THE SCOPE

The integration of smallholders into markets depends on a myriad of factors ranging from well-functioning input and output markets to trade and macroeconomic policies. However, it would not be feasible to design a methodology that would capture every possible

aspect. Importantly, not all factors have the same level of influence on smallholder participation in public food markets. PFP Benchmarking focuses on elements that are very particular to PFP, isolating factors that can be controlled or shaped by food procurement processes and their related institutions.

PFP Benchmarking specifically aims to assess to what extent public food markets are accessible to smallholder farmers. It also identifies linkages (if any) between food procurement and food security and nutrition interventions. Furthermore, it determines the level of coordination with complementary strategies, such as agricultural development programmes, which play a vital role in achieving PFP outcomes. The integrity of public procurement systems is a priority concern to most countries, and food procurement from smallholders must not deviate from this. PFP Benchmarking thus incorporates this dimension, helping governments to ensure that food purchases are also cost-effective, transparent and fair.

3.2 PFP BEST PRACTICES: SYSTEMATISING AN EVIDENCE AND KNOWLEDGE BASE ACCESSIBLE TO STAKEHOLDERS

The foundation for 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 smallholder farmers' participation in PFP markets. The motivation was also to make this evidence base widely available to stakeholders outside the academic domain.

The literature review sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the most common barriers to smallholder participation in PFP? (2) What practices have been adopted by countries to facilitate smallholder access to public food markets? (3) What practices help strengthen links with food security and nutrition goals? (4) Which best practices can be supported by evidence?

The method used to select relevant evidence was a Google Scholar search to identify academic publications and a Google search to identify grey literature. A combination of key words was used, namely 'public food procurement', 'Home Grown School Feeding', 'public procurement SMEs', 'green public procurement' and 'public procurement horizontal policies'.

The review covered the available research on PFP initiatives implemented around the world. However, the study encountered a common challenge found in best practice research, which is the limited availability of empirical investigations demonstrating links between practices and improved performance. Most of the public procurement literature consists of case studies using qualitative methods. Furthermore, due to the novelty of PFP, academic research on this topic is relatively scarce. The literature review prioritised academic journals; however, given this limitation, it also included grey literature—i.e. publications, reports, working papers and evaluations produced by governments and international institutions. Nevertheless, the review of the PFP research benefited from a few evaluations that used quantitative methods carried out in Brazil, El Salvador, Ethiopia, India and Tanzania.

To expand the knowledge base for the identification of best practices, the review also included the literature on public procurement horizontal policies,² principally strategies to foster the socio-economic inclusion of smaller suppliers and disadvantaged social groups

2. Policies to advance social, economic and environmental objectives through public procurement (Arrowsmith 2010).

through public procurement. This analysis revealed several overlaps between the horizontal policy and PFP research in relation to barriers to participation, and practices to facilitate access. Many studies, for example, showed that governments implemented similar strategies to promote the participation of both small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and smallholders in public procurement markets. Finally, the review summarised more general internationally accepted good practices in public procurement in terms of ensuring fair, transparent and financially sound procurement systems.

The comprehensive approach adopted in the literature review resulted in the examination of over 100 references. This provided the research with the advantage of having a lot of data and evidence to draw on, thus increasing the reliability of its conclusions. The inclusion of empirical studies meant that the review did not rely solely on qualitative assessments and was able to point to areas where links between specific practices and better performance have been proven. One of its main contributions, however, is that it helped systematise the knowledge on PFP, which until then had been fragmented in a series of different studies that examined the experiences of particular countries or particular implementation features. Importantly, it enabled the literature review to establish areas where there was broad consensus among researchers and practitioners regarding best practices to facilitate the participation of smallholders in PFP.

The research was peer-reviewed and published as a working paper in English,³ Spanish⁴ and French,⁵ all publicly available online. It was also summarised in two more concise publications⁶ to make the findings more accessible to stakeholders. The literature review built an evidence base for PFP best practices and created a solid foundation for the benchmarking methodology. Its publication also offered stakeholders systematised evidence to inform debates and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the foundations of PFP Benchmarking are open to a wide audience, thus promoting information disclosure and transparency regarding the origins of the benchmark.

3.3 PFP BENCHMARKING: DEFINING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF PERFORMANCE GAPS

The best practices identified in the literature review were subsequently used to create the PFP Benchmarking framework and indicators. The goal of the PFP Benchmarking framework is to assess the effectiveness of PFP systems and identify key areas for reform. Each best practice identified in the review was converted into benchmarking indicators that encompass a number of implementation features. More specifically, the indicators measure the extent to which a best practice has been adopted, thus providing stakeholders with an evaluation tool.

The PFP Benchmarking framework also drew on existing public procurement benchmarking methodologies created by the World Bank⁷ and the OECD.⁸ The World Bank pinpoints the transaction costs imposed on the private sector as a whole.

3. See: <https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/WP176_Public_food_procurement_from_smallholder_farmers.pdf>.

4. See: <https://ipcig.org/pub/esp/WP176SP_Compras_publicas_de_alimentos_a_pequenos_agricultores.pdf>.

5. See: <<https://bit.ly/3e9Dbur>>.

6. See: <https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/OP411_Public_food_procurement_from_smallholder_farmers.pdf>.

7. See: <<https://bpp.worldbank.org/reports>>.

8. See: <<http://www.mapsinitiative.org/>>.

The PFP Benchmarking framework incorporates similar indicators; however, the focus is on smallholder transaction costs.

The indicators were organised around two thematic areas which, according to the evidence, represent the most important aspects of PFP that facilitate smallholder participation in markets and generate positive impacts on food security and nutrition. Given that these areas are broad and encompass a number of practices, they were divided into sub-areas which group the most influential best practices together. The PFP Benchmarking thematic areas and sub-areas are described in Box 1. Figure 1 summarises the relationship between the thematic areas and PFP outcomes.

BOX 1. PFP Benchmarking thematic areas and sub-areas

Thematic Area 1: Specific public procurement frameworks

This thematic area refers to the rules and procedures that guide PFP. The best practices in this area outline effective strategies to create more accessible markets for smallholder farmers through PFP.

- **Sub-area 1.1: Addressing competition challenges** presents best practices to give competitive advantages to smallholders, including more vulnerable producers, without undermining the integrity of public procurement systems.
- **Sub-area 1.2: Simplifying requirements and reducing transaction costs** presents best practices to rationalise requirements and lower costs to facilitate smallholder engagement in PFP.

Thematic Area 2: Cross-sector coordination

This thematic area focuses on the need to have concerted action between different sectors and actors outside the public procurement domain, such as agriculture, food security and nutrition. It pinpoints best practices in cross-sector coordination that are vital to the success of PFP initiatives in terms of smallholder market access and food security and nutrition outcomes.

- **Sub-area 2.1: Capacity development strategies** presents best practices to develop smallholder capacity to meet PFP requirements and participate in PFP processes.
- **Sub-area 2.2: Adaptations to food baskets** presents best practices in food basket design to ensure that they are tailored to nutritional requirements and based on smallholder crop and livestock production.
- **Sub-area 2.3: Multi-stakeholder arrangements** presents best practices to establish effective multi-stakeholder arrangements to design and implement PFP initiatives.

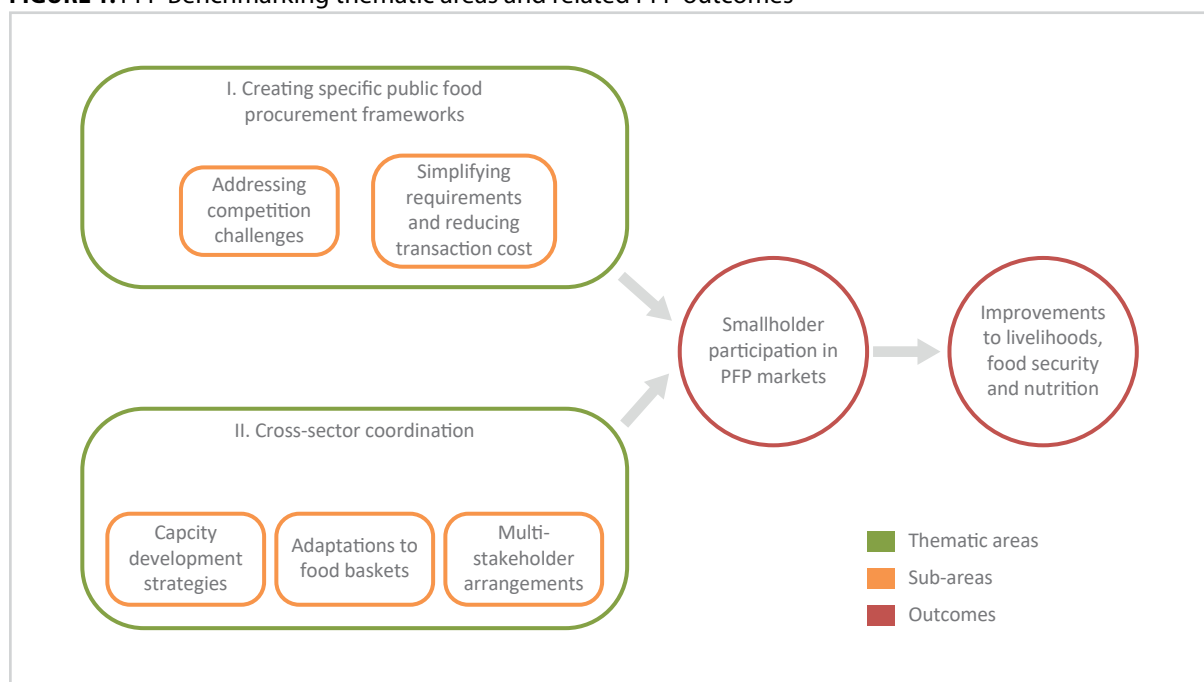
Source: Authors' elaboration.

The indicators thus assess the extent to which a best practice has been adopted, identifying implementation features that could be improved to facilitate smallholder access to PFP markets and strengthen links with food security and nutrition. They provide a standardised analytical framework that can clearly pinpoint performance gaps in relation to these outcomes. The standardisation offered by the indicators facilitates a more objective analysis and enables cross-country comparison. Tables 2 and 3 present the best practices, benchmarking indicators and their descriptions.

The benchmarking indicators receive a score according to the level of implementation of a best practice. The scoring system ranges from zero to three and consists of an adaptation of the MAPS methodology developed by the OECD. The assessor assigns a score by comparing PFP implementation features—the components of each indicator—to the scoring criteria developed for each indicator. The scoring system, therefore, provides a descriptive assessment

and translates it into numerical form. This further facilitates an objective appraisal of implementation designs and also enables the benchmarking to track changes over time. Table 4 presents the PFP Benchmarking scoring system.

FIGURE 1. PFP Benchmarking thematic areas and related PFP outcomes



Source: Authors' elaboration.

TABLE 2. PFP Benchmarking Thematic Area 1

Thematic Area 1: Specific PFP frameworks		
Best practice	Benchmarking indicator	Description
PFP must establish some type of preferential treatment scheme for smallholders. Women should receive additional preferences. Governments must monitor and enforce compliance with preferential treatment rules.	Preferential treatment scheme	Determines if preferential treatment is given to smallholders; classifies the type of preferential treatment—i.e. reservation, preferencing, subcontracting schemes; identifies any additional preferences given to women and other vulnerable groups; establishes if there are monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with preferential treatment schemes
Call for tenders must be publicised through channels accessible to farmers and include all the necessary information.	PFP calls	Describes the information included in the tender notice; where calls for tenders are advertised; how often the government issues calls for tenders; identifies the institutions responsible for issuing the calls
Any food procurement process should follow clear and predefined criteria to select suppliers. In non-competitive processes, food procurement should establish procurement caps for individual producers or groups of smallholders.	PFP process	Identifies the criteria used to select suppliers/bids; describes the bid submission process; establishes if procurement processes are competitive or non-competitive and if there are procurement limits for individual smallholders and/or farmer organisations
PFP should always use market prices as a benchmark.	Price mechanism	Determines if PFP adopts market prices and establishes if procuring entities use any agricultural price support



Procuring entities should require farmers and farmer organisations to provide only one type of registration, which is also the least onerous to obtain.	Registration requirements	Looks at the type of registration requirements for participation in public procurement processes; describes the bureaucracy and costs involved in obtaining the required registration
Bid security requirements should be waived, reduced or substituted by a bid declaration.	Bid security	Determines if bid securities have been waived, reduced or substituted by bid declaration; if bid security is a requirement, it will identify the form of bid instrument (cash, bank guarantee, insurance) and bid security amount
Performance guarantee requirements should be waived or reduced.	Performance guarantee	Determines if performance guarantees have been waived; if performance guarantees are a requirement, it will capture information on amounts, forms of performance guarantees, and how guarantees are collected by procuring entities or returned to suppliers
Food safety standards should never be lowered. However, food safety certification requirements and processes should be simplified to the greatest extent possible without compromising safety. Procuring entities should look to waive requirements that have no impact on food quality and safety.	Food safety and quality standards	Establishes if PFP follows food safety and quality standards; if standards are monitored; and identifies any adaptations to food quality safety certification requirements to facilitate smallholder participation
Food specifications should focus on food groups, nutrient content and basic nutritional requirements, rather than specific crop varieties, sizes, colour and appearance. Procuring entities should allow for variants that meet basic requirements.	Food procurement specifications	Describes the scope of food specifications; establishes if food specifications aim to reflect smallholder production; determines if variants or substitutions are permitted; identifies any strategies to facilitate compliance with packaging requirements
Ideally farmers should receive payment on delivery. Payment time-frames should not exceed 30 days. Governments should also address payment delays by establishing fines and penalties.	Payments	Identifies time-frames for supplier payment; determines if legal framework establishes specific deadlines; establishes if interest or penalties exist and whether they are disbursed automatically or triggered by an administrative or legal procedure; identifies payment method
Governments must establish mechanisms to safeguard procuring entities and farmers against default. Price mechanisms must also protect both parties against commercial risk and allow prices to be renegotiated near delivery date.	Forward contracts and advance payments	Determines if forward contracts are used; identifies if farmers receive advance payments; how forward contracts are targeted; identifies price mechanisms and possibilities for price renegotiation; establishes if there are any safeguards against default
Preferential treatment schemes must have clear criteria and certification processes to identify eligible producers.	Eligibility criteria	Determines if preferential treatment schemes have clear eligibility criteria to identify smallholders; if this is established through laws, regulations or policy and how eligibility is certified
Governments must create strategies to subdivide contracts to ensure that smallholders can meet food demand. Establishing more decentralised procurement models can also help to reduce contract size.	Contract lotting	Looks at the level of decentralisation of food purchases; determines if contract lotting is permitted by laws and regulations; describes how contract sizes are defined; identifies any contract lotting strategies

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Importantly, the scoring criteria allow stakeholders to visualise the extent to which a best practice has been implemented—i.e. whether a benchmark is fully implemented, partially implemented or not implemented at all. There are a number of complementary practices and implementation features that countries must adopt to fully achieve the benchmark. For example, in Indicator 1 (preferential treatment scheme), in addition to establishing some type of preferential treatment scheme, countries must also have monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and provide women and other groups of vulnerable farmers with additional competitive advantages.

TABLE 3. PFP Benchmarking Thematic Area 2

Thematic Area 2: Cross-sector coordination		
Best practice	Indicator	Description
PFP requires concerted action between different sectors. Ideally governments should establish a specific multi-stakeholder arrangement with a clear mandate and control over implementation and coordination decisions. Multi-stakeholder arrangements should involve all key actors and sectors that have a stake in PFP, including civil society and farmer organisations.	Multi-stakeholder arrangements	Identifies which government institutions are involved in the multi-stakeholder arrangements, and their roles and responsibilities; establishes if civil society and farmer organisations are represented; describes the mandate of the multisectoral arrangement; assesses the level of decision-making power in relation to operational decisions
Food baskets should be compatible with smallholder production systems. Governments must devise specific guidelines and criteria to incorporate smallholder production into food baskets. Food basket design should be based on smallholder production systems and include criteria such as seasonal, fresh, whole foods, indigenous crops and local varieties. Given that in many countries there are distinctions between men's and women's crops, food baskets should specifically aim to include crops produced by women. The design of food baskets should also involve close collaboration and dialogue between nutrition, agriculture and procurement stakeholders.	Food basket	Describes how food baskets are defined, including stakeholders involved in food basket design; identifies government guidelines and criteria for incorporating smallholder production into food baskets; establishes if consultations or assessments around smallholder food supply are included in food basket design; assesses if crops procured match smallholder production; establishes if food baskets include 'women's crops'
Governments and development partners should provide specific support to smallholders and farmer organisations to fulfil PFP requirements, access information and participate in PFP processes.	Capacity development	Identifies specific capacity development strategies to help smallholders meet PFP requirements; captures any type of support provided to prepare and submit bids and participate in procurement processes; pinpoints strategies to expand access to information on PFP opportunities
In addition to specific support as described above, farmers should receive assistance to expand their production, post-harvest, processing and marketing capacities. PFP initiatives must, therefore, be coordinated with agricultural interventions. Countries must establish coordinated targeting mechanisms to create overlaps between agricultural intervention beneficiaries and farmers participating in PFP initiatives.	Coordinated targeting	Identifies the targeting mechanisms adopted by agricultural interventions and PFP; describes gender targeting mechanisms; assesses their ability to promote overlaps between agricultural interventions and PFP beneficiaries

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The benchmarking assessment can thus offer a more precise comparison of implementation features against best practice standards. A more detailed evaluation not only provides actors with more information to draw on, but also highlights specific areas where change is needed to improve performance. Furthermore, it can capture the approaches used in different countries to achieve a benchmark, enabling stakeholders to identify successful solutions and adapt these strategies to their contexts. The scoring system has been deliberately designed to be simple, to communicate results clearly and generate easy-to-use knowledge. It should also be noted that the PFP Benchmarking scores are not translated into country rankings. The focus is on the identification of performance gaps and approaches to achieve a benchmark.

TABLE 4. PFP Benchmarking scoring system

Scoring system	
3	The full achievement of all the standards for the indicator
2	Less than full achievement of the standards for the indicator
1	More extensive reforms are needed to meet the best practice standards
0	Failure to meet all of the best practice standards

Source: Authors' elaboration.

PFP Benchmarking is thus a diagnostic tool designed to meet stakeholders' need for reliable data and knowledge on which to base decision-making processes. The importance of having reliable information and the considerable amount of effort this entails should not be understated. The benchmarking reduces the burden on national actors to collect and process data and build an evidence base. The assessment fosters better policy performance by providing a solid basis for reflection and decision-making.

Another key feature of the PFP Benchmarking framework is that data are collected in a standardised way. There are two different data collection tools—i.e. desk review and 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 to ensure 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 structured questionnaire comprises specific questions for each benchmarking indicator. The goal is to have a questionnaire that can structure the interview process, collect standardised data and systematise responses to facilitate data collection, processing and analysis. The questionnaire comprises both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions allow interviewees to provide more details on implementation features. They also allow stakeholders to express their perceptions and opinions.

Reliable data are essential to good benchmarking. A common challenge in international benchmarking approaches is that data may not always be comparable. A key innovation of PFP Benchmarking is the standardisation of data collection and analysis. Standardised data collection and analysis using the same tools is applied to all benchmarking assessments, thus enabling cross-country comparisons. Data reliability is also safeguarded by the quality control system, whereby the data collected are subject to verification through triangulation with programme documents, relevant legislation and academic literature.

The PFP Benchmarking approach is an analytical framework to inform decision-making which is based on reliable data. Moreover, data analysis is enhanced by the inclusion of different stakeholders' perceptions and opinions on programme challenges and benefits. The background information collected through the desk review ensures that country context is also taken into account.

3.4 PFP BENCHMARKING PROCESS: FOSTERING ACTIVE STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

The benchmarking process consists of the following seven steps:

1. Data collection: The benchmarking process starts with the desk review, which gathers all the relevant and available data. This is followed by applying the questionnaire to focus groups comprising all stakeholders involved in implementation. Focus groups are organised at the national, subnational and community levels.
2. Data analysis: The data collected through the structured questionnaire are triangulated with the information from the desk review. The evaluator provides a description of the implementation features, and compares them to the best practice standards for each indicator. Key performance gaps are identified and grouped into broad priority areas. Possible strategies to achieve benchmarks, including examples from other countries, are also outlined during the data analysis.
3. Stakeholder feedback I: The preliminary results are presented at face-to-face meetings with the different stakeholders who took part in the data collection process. The results and recommendations to achieve benchmarks are discussed, and participants provide their views on the feasibility of the strategies identified to address performance gaps.
4. Report writing. The benchmarking evaluation results and recommendations are adjusted according to stakeholder's feedback and systematised in a country report.
5. Stakeholder feedback II: The report is presented to key stakeholders responsible for implementation, with a view to collecting a final round of feedback. This stage is usually carried out remotely via conference call, email or webinar. The goal is to generate consensus among actors on the benchmarking evaluation results and recommendations.
6. Report consolidation: The report is reviewed according to the discussions, and the final version is distributed among stakeholders.
7. Methodology development: Evaluators discuss methodological challenges found in the benchmarking process and identify ways to improve the approach.

PFP Benchmarking uses a focus group approach, which is intended to enhance the primary data collection process. It allows for a larger sample size and reduces the time and cost involved in data collection. The exchanges between focus group participants provide additional information on implementation features that may not be captured by the questionnaire. Importantly, it stimulates active discussions on challenges and possible ways to achieve best practice standards. Another key feature of this approach is that all actors involved

in PFP implementation are represented in focus groups, including civil society and smallholder farmers. Moreover, broad-based participation is further promoted by involving government institutions at the subnational and community levels.

PFP Benchmarking is thus a participatory process that promotes a more horizontal approach in the identification of performance gaps. It involves different categories of actors and is thus inclusive of diverse views and perspectives. Notably, it promotes the participation of communities that have valuable knowledge but are often excluded from international benchmarking evaluations.

Furthermore, stakeholders play a key role in data analysis and the selection of strategies to achieve benchmarks. The assessment results and recommendations are presented and discussed with relevant actors in two different rounds of feedback. This not only promotes transparency in the benchmarking process but also allows actor engagement in the identification of effective approaches to implement best practices. Crucially, the feedback stages allow stakeholders to learn about other countries' experiences, compare solutions and identify adaptations that are suited to their particular contexts and needs. The benchmarking is thus able to pinpoint legitimate and feasible ways to improve implementation of PFP.

Perhaps the most important attribute of the PFP Benchmarking process is its ability to promote collective learning. The evaluation is essentially a tool to frame debates around how to achieve better policy outcomes. It stimulates a process of active reflection where information and knowledge are disseminated among different actors. The learning and collaboration process provided by the benchmarking creates a foundation for future actions and changes in rules, procedures and discourses around PFP.

4 THE PFP BENCHMARKING APPLICATION: LESSONS LEARNED AND METHODOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

The PFP Benchmarking thematic areas, indicators and scoring criteria were submitted to a peer review process involving experts in different fields of knowledge. The goal was to validate the methodology and create consensus around its scope, goals and features. The inclusion of different expertise in this process also facilitated the development of the multidimensional approach used. Importantly, it enabled the refinement of all benchmarking indicators, particularly those outside the scope of public procurement. This process allowed PFP Benchmarking to reach the testing stage, where it could be applied in countries.

The first PFP Benchmarking pilot country was Guatemala (October 2018), where it was used to assess the national school feeding programme. The main goals of the programme are to promote better nutrition among children, improve educational outcomes and provide smallholder farmers with a market channel. All stakeholders involved in programme implementation participated in focus groups, including government ministries, local authorities, civil society organisations, farmers, teachers and parents. The focus groups brought together over 50 participants. The assessment results and recommendations to improve programme performance were presented to stakeholders in Guatemala City, with a view to gathering the first round of feedback. The benchmarking assessment report was subsequently devised and submitted for a second round of feedback. The final results were presented in an international webinar and at two different face-to-face international workshops involving Central American countries that also implement school feeding programmes. The workshop

provided a valuable opportunity to further discuss the benchmarking results with a broader range of actors, and to share lessons learned and innovations with other countries.

The Guatemala pilot provided several insights into the practical application of the PFP Benchmarking methodology. The questionnaire proved to be excessively long, and its highly technical language posed significant challenges to focus group facilitators. The structured questionnaire was then revised to address these issues. The scoring criteria for each indicator were also reviewed so as to capture the level of best practice implementation with more precision.

PFP Benchmarking was subsequently applied in El Salvador (July 2019), Colombia (July 2019) and later Honduras (November 2019). It was used to evaluate PFP initiatives linked to food assistance programmes—i.e. school feeding and child nutrition interventions. In El Salvador a total of 80 actors participated in the benchmarking process. In Colombia and Honduras, the benchmarking evaluation involved a total of 37 and 38 participants, respectively. In every country all categories of actors involved in programme implementation took part in the benchmarking process, encompassing national and subnational governments, international cooperation institutions, farmers, caterers and community members. The process engaged all relevant sectors such as education, health, agriculture, food safety, food security and nutrition.

The application of FPF Benchmarking in these countries revealed further methodological challenges, leading to another review of the data collection and analysis tools. The questionnaire was still excessively time-consuming and had to be revised again to reduce the burden on participants, while at the same time ensuring that all the necessary data were captured to enable analysis of the indicators. Paper-based questionnaires were used due to limited Internet access; however, they slowed down the data analysis process. To address this issue, survey software was introduced in the benchmarking assessment in Honduras, which allowed the questionnaire to be applied both off- and online. This instrument proved to be more efficient, as the results are analysed as soon as the surveys are completed.

The focus group approach presented several advantages in terms of allowing a larger sample size, providing additional information and reducing data collection costs. Participants engaged fully with the discussions around the questionnaire, bringing a range of views on performance gaps and best practice implementation. However, lengthy discussions also imposed a burden on participants' time and generated fatigue. Furthermore, hierarchies created by gender, age, race, ethnicity and income often impeded participants from expressing their honest opinion. For example, farmers often did not feel comfortable discussing implementation problems when government officials were also in the group. Even in cases where focus group participants had similar backgrounds, it was common to find a dominant actor who tried to take over the discussion.

Although these challenges are common in focus group research, it was considered important to take specific actions to avoid these issues in future assessments. Focus group guidelines were consequently developed to ensure that the same approach is used by focus group facilitators in all PFP Benchmarking evaluations. The number of participants is limited to a maximum of 10, and discussions should not last longer than 90 minutes. Focus groups must also be as homogeneous as possible. It is recommended that they are organised according to the category of stakeholder—i.e. smallholder farmers, government ministry and local authority—and aim to have equal representation of women and men. Importantly, focus group moderators must continuously develop their skills to ensure open discussion and active participation among all actors involved in the benchmarking process. They must also be able to guide and adapt the flow of the discussion to prevent focus groups from going off topic and exceeding the time limit.

The PFP Benchmarking process, therefore, benefited from the inclusion of the methodology development step. After each assessment evaluators had an opportunity to reflect on the methodology and make the necessary changes to ensure the practical applicability of the approach. PFP Benchmarking is thus constantly evolving and responding to different methodological challenges.

The application of PFP Benchmarking has shed light on new areas for exploration such as the inclusion of sustainability indicators related to promoting food waste reduction and management, sustainable food production practices and climate-resilient crops. Future actions will also focus on expanding the application to countries in Africa and Asia and devising a global report presenting cross-country comparisons and innovations.

Furthermore, next steps will include a survey to collect data on participants' views on the PFP Benchmarking process, as well as a standardised system to monitor best practice implementation and capture other positive changes in policies, procedures and practices related to PFP. Finally, benchmarking results and progress towards best practice standards will be made available on a specific website to provide knowledge and information to a wider audience.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main goal of PFP Benchmarking is to improve the implementation of PFP by fostering the adoption of best practices. It consists of a diagnostic tool to identify strategies that can lead to improved performance in countries. Its novelty lies on its ability to generate knowledge and evidence on which to base policymaking. PFP Benchmarking is the first systematic attempt to pinpoint best practices and 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 comparison. The literature review and best practices also meet stakeholders' need for evidence on the links between practices and desired outcomes.

The benchmarking assessment does not focus on comparing results and ranking countries. Instead, it concentrates on determining the practices that have led to better performance. The indicators and scores help countries identify the level of implementation of a best practice, thus pinpointing very specific areas for improvement. It captures other countries' strategies to overcome challenges and improve policy outcomes. This promotes knowledge-sharing and supports stakeholders to find adaptations that suit their context, encouraging new ideas and ensuring the applicability of practices.

The benchmarking process, however, is where the real added value of the methodology can be found. The assessment is essentially a process for collective learning that is transparent and participatory. A wide range of stakeholders participate in the benchmarking process, particularly in the data collection, analysis and evidence use stages. This enables the approach to include a variety of views and perceptions, thus promoting the inclusion of rural communities, which are the main beneficiaries of PFP. Stakeholders thus have influence over the benchmarking results and recommendations. Importantly, the benchmarking process allows knowledge to be disseminated and stimulates reflection and debate. This creates a solid foundation for action and innovation that can help countries find effective strategies to improve their PFP models. Finally, methodology improvement is an integral part of the process, ensuring that the benchmarking can respond to challenges encountered during its application.

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