

School Nutrition Programs in Kenya: Successes and problem areas

By

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It is now over two decades since the introduction of the first school nutrition program in the independent Kenya; today the country has three school nutrition programs namely: the School Feeding Program (SFP), the Expanded School Feeding Program (ESFP) and the Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP). In addition, we have the School Health and Nutrition section within the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) established in 1995 to address health and nutrition issues of both pre- and primary school children.

By the year 2000, it was estimated that all these programs cater for over 2.5 million pupils in both pre- and primary schools, majority of whom are from the arid and semi arid (ASAL) regions. With the historic election in Kenya that saw National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) party ascend to power in December 2002, the government introduced free primary education in January 2003, a universally accepted concept. This has led to a tremendous increase in the number of children accessing primary education in all regions within the country and by extension the number of pupils who need to benefit from such programs. Up to December 2003, an estimated 7 million children had enrolled. The greatest percentage of them comes from socio-economically deprived and nutritionally vulnerable regions. If the current enrollment trend continues, the number of pupils who need to benefit from these programs will far outweigh the capacity of the programs to sustain them in the near future. Already the available resources have been pushed to the limit. In 2003, World Food Program (WFP) sent aid appeal to donor agencies and well wishers in the amount of USD 15 million to continue providing lunch to school children in the year 2004.

The school nutrition programs in the country operate differently and are funded by different organizations (International agencies, the government, non governmental organizations). For example, the SFP, which draws its funding from the Kenya government and WFP, currently operates in 31 districts in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) region, covering all or some

primary schools within these districts. The program is implemented by the government through MOEST, while WFP, mainly sources for funds, provides both food and non-food resources, among others. This program is both complemented and supplemented by the Expanded School Feeding Program that also provides food for the socio-economically deprived and nutritionally vulnerable pre and primary school pupils from ASAL but is funded by the American Global Initiative through the World Food Program. Of interest, is the fact that this program also works in collaboration with the Ministry of Health on children health issues.

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program on the other hand, was initiated as an ambitious plan to improve the quality of health and nutritional status of children between the ages of 0 and 6 years by the year 2004. Unfortunately this has not been achieved to date. The ECD program is not a totally new concept in Kenya. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that, by 1995, about 20 000 ECD centers were in Kenya providing both pre-school and day care services for more than 1 million children aged between three and six years. Moreover, by the 2000, the number had increased to about 26, 300. This increase could be attributed to the initiation of the ECD program and the highly effective, decentralized, community based program that the country is known for, among others. The program performs a number of functions such as provision of Vitamin A supplementation and de-worming. The World Bank, MOEST and non-governmental organizations support this program.

All in all, these programs have had their fair share of successes, while encountering some problems and challenges.

To begin with, I will enumerate the successes, then look at the problematic areas/challenges and finally provide the way forward.

Successes of School Nutrition Programs in Kenya have identified as:

- ❖ These programs enable over 2 million children especially from disadvantaged areas to access pre- and primary education. An increased regular school attendance has been observed in areas where these programs are undertaken. This would have not been possible without these noble programs.
- ❖ Increased awareness about nutrition and health issues has been observed in most areas where these programs operate.
- ❖ A resource center has been set up at the Health and Nutrition section of MOEST. This center has been at the forefront in disseminating nutrition and health information, particularly to the stakeholders in the education sector ie teachers, education officers, pupils and parents.
- ❖ These programs have mobilized the community to undertake active participation in their children's education, and through them, most people from the less advantaged communities have started to appreciate the importance of child education and nutrition.
- ❖ Close to 2000 early childhood development teachers have been successfully trained on matters relating to health and nutrition.

Problem areas may be listed as:

- There is lack of clear policy on school nutrition programs in the country for all schools

- The sustainability of these programs is of great concern because they largely depend on donor funding.
- Accessibility of the schools for delivery of the food to the intended beneficiaries, as most of them is based in remote parts of the country with poor infrastructural network remaining a great challenge.
- How to cope with the increasing number of children accessing the free primary education introduced by the NARC government in January 2003.
- How to cope with the effect of HIV/AIDS on these programs. The toll of the disease in the country is felt by the increasing number of orphaned children, who among other things are forced to either drop out of school to take up the responsibility as the head of households or to attend to their ailing parents/guardians. AIDS also have adverse effect on teachers and other personnel who are required to support the programs
- The programs have continued to concentrate mostly in areas where they originally started while ignoring other areas which might be in need of the same services today.

The following are proposed as a viable way forward.

- Encourage and promote multi-sectoral approaches to the school nutrition programs. At this point all the major stakeholders must be involved.
- School gardening programs should be encouraged, where the pupils would be encouraged to plant cheaply and locally available nutritious crops, for example, the traditional vegetables, which can then be used to supplement the food aid.
- Infrastructural networks such as roads, information and communication facilities etc should be improved to increase accessibility for delivery of foods.
- Encouragement of sharing of success and best practices between the government and other countries at the regional, continental and global levels.
- These programs should be expanded to include most parts of the country currently not catered for; this is so as to realize greater benefits by most children in need.

