

School Feeding Programs in Kenya: Transitioning to a Homegrown Approach

by Nica Langer

School feeding programs have been implemented in Kenya since the 1980's with varying degrees of success. Used primarily to incentivize the enrollment and retention of rural children and girls, subsidized meal programs have played an integral part in realizing the country's goal of universal primary education. Historically, the involvement of large foreign players has greatly limited the Kenyan government's role in the direction and stewardship of these programs. Heavy reliance on foreign aid and management has subjected the programs to fluctuating, and often conditional, international support. In an effort to transition toward a more sustainable and nationally integrated alternative, the Kenyan government introduced the Homegrown School Feeding Program (HGSP) in 2009. Though financial strains and infrastructural challenges have called into question Kenya's ability to successfully fund and operate its own school feeding program, the country's renewed commitment to education, agriculture, and rural development shows great promise.



Children in a rural Kenyan school returning from recess
Photo courtesy of Flickr user computerwhiz417

Roughly 80 percent of Kenyans live in rural areas and eke out a living as farmers, and poor land quality and chronic water shortages have put the country in a constant state of food insecurity (UNESCO 2005). Although its economy boasts a sizeable agricultural sector (mainly focused on exports of first-world luxuries like flowers, tea, and coffee), Kenya is a food-deficit country with less than 20 percent of its land suitable for successful cultivation. Compounding these difficulties, frequent and severe droughts in the historically precarious Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL) have contributed to high rates of crop loss, malnutrition, and violence over limited arable land and scarce water (MoA 2010).

The ASAL, home to roughly 30 percent of the Kenyan population, has suffered through the crippling social effects of recently intensifying droughts and food shortages. Kenya's school-aged population is among the groups most negatively impacted. To alleviate the health and developmental consequences of childhood malnutrition, increase primary school enrollment, and combat social pressures that limit educational opportunities for girls, the Kenyan government began a school-feeding program in 1980 (Regnault De La Mothe 2008). The initiative, significantly backed by World Food Program (WFP) funds and management, is one of the largest and longest-standing school feeding partnerships of its kind. In 2008, the program served

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Child obtaining water, a scarce resource in Kenya
Photo courtesy of Flickr user angela7dreams

1.2 million children in 3,600 schools—nearly 21.3 percent of all primary school students in Kenya (USDA 2010).

Recently, in accordance with “Education for All” developmental targets, the Kenyan government decided to expand its role in the implementation of school feeding programs nationwide (MoE 2003). Through the introduction of the Homegrown School Feeding Program, Kenyan policymakers are looking for ways to better integrate and promote goals in education, agriculture, and rural development through inter-sectoral cooperation and

progressive policy changes. Over time, the Kenyan ministries of Education and

Agriculture seek to limit the role of external players in order to transform the program into a more sustainable and independent national enterprise.

Though much has already been done to boost rural attendance, more effort and coordination will be required to obviate many of the current impediments to School Feeding Programs. To fully realize the enormous humanitarian potential of the HGSFP, special attention must be given to improving the quality of rural infrastructure, investing in human capital, increasing local stewardship of feeding programs, and supporting economic opportunities for small-scale food producers. Without these critical developments, the goals of the HGSFP will fail to serve the long-term interests of ASAL inhabitants and will instead contribute to a continued cycle of foreign dependency and educational inequity in Kenya.

HISTORY OF SCHOOL FEEDING IN KENYA

Kenya's school feeding program has experienced continued expansion and refinement, especially during the past decade. Since the introduction of free compulsory primary education for all Kenyan children in 2003, the WFP-assisted feeding program has developed alongside national policies of increased

student health, attendance, and performance (MoE 2003). From its inception, it has targeted food inequality in the most vulnerable areas of Kenya, including school districts in the ASAL and the informal urban slums of large cities such as Nairobi and Mombasa (Espejo 2009).

To address historical primary school absenteeism among Kenya's most impoverished and traditional communities, free meals are used as an incentive to attract school-aged children to class. Within rural communities in which food is scarce, this daily meal provision relieves much of the burden of childrearing. The beneficiaries of the program are extremely poor families that are largely unable to provide the minimum recommended daily allowances (RDA) of calories, protein, and essential micronutrients to their children. These poor conditions may irreversibly stunt the mental and physical development of young children, resulting in wasted potentials and lifelong difficulties (Galal 200). The nutritional importance of the school meal (usually around 700kcal) is immense, representing more than half of the consumed RDA values for 40 percent of the participating students (Finan 2010).

According to field studies, the "magnet effect" of the meal programs has greatly increased school attendance rates especially among young children. Rural schools that provide meals show higher attendance rates and lower initial dropout rates than schools that do not (Espejo 2009). The immediate financial and nutritional benefits provided by schooling attract parents struggling to support their children on low-yielding subsistence farming. On average, participating families save between four and nine percent of their annual income by taking advantage of school meals and avoiding added food expenditures (Finan 2010).

Additionally, many rural parents have been able to utilize schooling as a form of subsidized childcare, which gives them more time to engage in household chores, farming, or other income-generating activities. The short and long-term benefits to the child are even more pronounced. Studies tracking the impact of school feeding have shown improvements in IQ, immunity to illness, height, and weight among participating children (Galal 2005). Micronutrient fortification, malaria treatment, and annual de-worming initiatives have been implemented alongside school meal programs and have had considerable effect on increasing overall student health (Galloway 2009). No longer distracted by hunger and the crippling effects of extreme malnutrition, the students are better able to concentrate, understand new material, and socialize with both teachers and peers. According to firsthand teacher accounts, children who receive meals are generally healthier, more receptive, energetic, and easier to teach (Galal 2005). Following WFP recommendations, some ASAL school districts have begun providing fortified morning biscuits to get a jumpstart on the cognitive and nutritional benefits of feeding (Finan 2010; Galal 2005).

REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Though significant gains have been achieved throughout the country in terms of educational expansion and accessibility, rural Kenyans continue to lag far behind their urban counterparts. Between the years 2002 and 2007, although Kenya's net primary school enrollment increased from 77 percent to 92 percent, enrollment in the ASAL increased from 17 percent to 29 percent (Finan 2010).

Though school-feeding programs have increased student enrollment rates, attendance,

Completion Rate		
Agro-ecological zone	Boys	Girls
Urban	77.3	92.4
Government semi-arid	60.4	64.1
WFP semi-arid	66.6	37.8
Arid	43.0	25.2
School Meals		
Schools with meals	59.5	57.9
Control	64.6	46.3

and exam scores, rural districts have exhibited only modest gains in completion rates and advancement



Farmer attempting to water crops
Photo courtesy of Food Ethics Council

to secondary school (Finan 2010). With average completion rates hovering at around 34 percent in arid and 57 percent in semi-arid districts, it is clear that even with the presence of school meals, regional disparities in education persist. Especially among poor children and girls, these numbers are far below the standards Kenya must meet in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals 1-3 (poverty reduction, universal primary education, gender equality) by 2015 (MoE 2004).

Unfortunately, the meal program's positive impact on school attendance appears to weaken with age. Within traditional rural communities, as children get older they become valuable economic resources to their families, and the pressure to contribute to household chores and earnings steadily mounts. Between seventh and eighth grade, the appeal of a school meal is suddenly much less significant and dropout rates increase with the rising opportunity costs of staying in school (Finan 2010). As they reach adolescence, boys are expected to start work as farmhands or manual laborers and girls are groomed for early marriage in order to fetch a higher bride price (Bogonko 1992). If a rural child's primary schooling experience has not instilled the merits of an education (the "catalyst effect"), cultural and economic pressures thwart primary completion and progression to secondary school (Njeru 2005). Furthermore, due to a general scarcity of secondary schools in the ASAL, many bright and otherwise willing rural children are forced to prematurely end their schooling after

standard 8 (UNESCO 2005).

Other factors such as water scarcity and inadequate infrastructure continue to impede full realization of the central goals of Kenya's school meal program. Certain financially strapped schools require families to contribute money, labor, water, and firewood to receive the daily meal allowance, compromising the full effect of the meal incentive (Finan 2010). Rural schools, widely without firewood to fuel kitchen stoves, clean water, and money to pay cooks, find it difficult to provide daily meal services without burdening parents for missing inputs (Bwonda 2005). Additionally, schools are not always equipped with suitable bathrooms and kitchens to ensure that food is prepared in a hygienic and safe environment. These factors undermine the quality and effectiveness of the feeding program in many districts in rural Kenya.

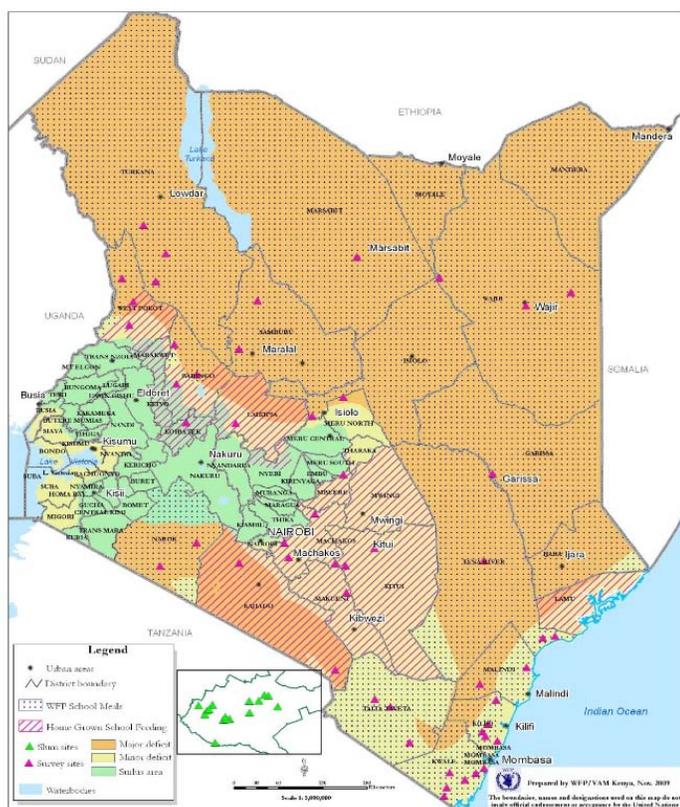
Another large obstacle for Kenyan schools to overcome is related to the poor quality of instruction. Due in part to FPE initiatives and the popularity of free school meals, hungry students seeking food aid have overrun many schoolhouses in the ASAL regions. According to WFP findings, the average enrollment of schools that offer meals is 28 percent higher than schools that do not, and the average student-teacher ratio is a staggering 11 points higher than the national average (Finan 2010). Thus, although the goal of increased attendance has been somewhat met, little has been done to help schools cope with recently inflated student bodies and declining teacher incentives.

The many challenges inherent to the ASAL have made it increasingly difficult to recruit willing and qualified teachers to school districts. Kenyan educators have largely avoided rural schools hundreds of miles from city centers with few roads, resources,



Lack of resources for schoolchildren
Photo courtesy of USAID

Map of food regions -- Finan (2010)



Legend: Orange=Arid, Yellow=Semi-Arid, Stripes=HGSFP, Dots=WFP

and networks of support. High student-teacher ratios, cramped and dilapidated schoolhouses, poor infrastructure, and a lack of necessary school supplies threaten to undo many of the notable gains associated with increased primary school enrollment (Bwonda 2005; UNESCO 2005).

TRANSITION TO A GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED PROGRAM

In an effort to transition away from WFP assistance and create a more sustainable and locally integrated program, the Ministry of Education began implementing a Homegrown School Feeding Program (HGSFP) in July of 2009 (Espejo 2009). This is not the first time the government of Kenya has attempted to institute a federally funded school meals program through multi-sectoral cooperation. A short-lived school milk program was introduced in 1980 under former President Moi in order to simultaneously increase primary school enrollment and ensure a stable market for Kenyan dairy producers. The ambitious initiative that provided free milk to 4.3 million primary school students failed shortly after its launch due to high costs, low accountability, and poor road infrastructure

(Bogonko 1992).

To ensure that the new program does not meet a similar end, Kenyan policymakers are working closely with WFP and United Nations representatives to facilitate a gradual shift of financial responsibility. Beginning in 2009, the Kenyan government transferred over 500,000 primary school children from WFP programs (mostly from Semi-Arid districts) to HGSFP, and promised to add 50,000 students each year until reaching full coverage (Finan 2010). Prior to this transfer, 71 percent of associated program costs were provided by WFP, 15 percent were borne by local communities, and only 14 percent came from the Kenyan government (Galloway 2009). To guarantee the success of this new program, the Kenyan government allocated \$5.3 million (along with an additional \$2 million from the Japanese government counterpart fund) in 2009 to subsidize the costs of expansion (USDA 2009). Even so, with combined annual costs of the previous program estimated at around \$20 million a year (Galloway 2009), the Kenyan Ministry of Finance must be ready to commit itself to even greater investment if the government intends to replace WFP as the main benefactor of school meals in Kenya.

Rather than continuing to rely on WFP agents to procure foodstuffs and distribute meals, the new program transfers cash stipends directly into the bank accounts of participating schools to be applied to the program (Finan 2010). The government makes these cash payments twice a year at the beginning of each three-month term, with aid amounts determined by net student enrollment. The government-subsidized program sets funding levels at nine cents per student meal, approximately half of what WFP sponsored programs spend per meal (USDA 2009). Kenyan policymakers from the ministries of Education, Finance, and Agriculture, have expressed confidence that local procurement efforts and increased community support will allow school-feeding programs to survive despite tighter resources (USDA 2009).

To avoid additional overhead costs associated with management and distribution expenses, the government of Kenya has transferred the logistics of implementation to local School Management Committees (made up of parents, teachers, and community members) who are placed in charge of purchasing food from local farmers, cooperatives, and traders. Based on field research, it was observed that: Community participation and involvement was strong at every school visited. Each household is asked to

contribute to the [School Feeding Program], and typical contributions include firewood, water, cash for cooks' salaries, and salt. When households cannot contribute, the SMC makes alternative arrangements with the family (USDA 2009).

In these ways, the Kenyan government hopes to integrate schools more fully into rural communities, provide an economic stimulus for impoverished villages, boost local agricultural productivity, and establish a sustainable school meals program independent from heavy foreign subsidization.

CRITIQUE OF THE HOMEGROWN SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAM

Critics of the new program cite the fact that most rural communities in the ASAL do not have the production supply capability to support a potentially overwhelming demand for food. According to research undertaken by the USDA with funds provided by the Gates Foundation:

“Without projects or collaboration with other partners to bolster the supply side of HGSFP Program, the project as currently implemented is a local procurement project, and not a local production project. The project schools are in ASALs with limited production capacity, with 60-70 percent of the food imported from outside the district.” (USDA 2009).

Rural farmers are usually located far away from key agricultural inputs such as water, fertilizer, pesticides, and seed, lack adequate large-scale storage facilities, have little access to affordable bank credit, and are unable to efficiently transport bulk harvests (MoA 2010). As a result, instead of funneling money into local communities, many claim that the main beneficiaries of HGSFP are non-local commercial food traders. Often, this is not a concern for policymakers who tend to define “local” in more national and even regional terms (USDA 2009). To protect and foster the safety net benefits associated with small-scale local agriculture, the Government of Kenya needs to find ways to increase the production capabilities of rural farmers. To address this problem, the Ministry of Agriculture needs to provide more support in the form of rural farming grants, infrastructure (roads, storage facilities, accessible inputs), encouragement of indigenous plant and animal husbandry, and sustainability reeducation (Finan 2010). The HGSFP currently encourages the

purchase of key “orphan crops” like sorghum, millet, and cowpeas due to their drought-resistance and ASAL suitability (MoA 2010). Currently, due to present system weaknesses, maize still constitutes a majority of



Government school-feeding programs aim to improve conditions for Kenyan schoolchildren

Photo courtesy of Flickr user angela7dreams

the food purchased for school meal programs (USDA 2009).

Another point of contention surrounding HGSFP in rural Kenya is the cost-motivated prohibition of the purchase of fruit, horticulture, and livestock products for use within the school feeding programs. Local communities are currently pushing for the inclusion of meat in the meal budget to involve pastoralists who comprise the bulk of the economic activity in the ASAL (USDA 2009). Incorporating meat and other livestock products in the school meals program would go a long way in appeasing pastoralist groups that may feel marginalized and excluded from social planning and development initiatives that seem tailored to exclusively benefit agriculturalists (MoA 2010). Since the ASAL is home to a limited number of productive farmers, more inclusive measures would certainly serve to increase the food procurement rates from within vulnerable herding communities. Additionally, to better support ASAL interests, policymakers ought to implement a scaled stipend system that adjusts for regional food scarcity and price disparities, rather than the current flat allowance (USDA 2009). Under the current system, droughts and ever rising food costs have threatened the viability of school meals programs in food-scarce school districts.

A final point of debate is founded on the fear that

direct money transfers to poor schools to be managed by civilian committees could expose the program to various strains of inefficiency and corruption. Within the impoverished communities of the ASAL, potential failures could arise from schools reporting artificially inflated enrollment numbers, succumbing to bribery and seller favoritism, and using government funds for non-meal related ends (Finan 2010). Without proper training and oversight, some fear that the HGSFP runs a high risk of falling short of intended goals. However, SMC's have been in charge of administrative duties within the Kenyan educational system for decades (Bogonko 1992). Since the government has historically only provided funding for teachers' salaries and few other basic expenses, communities have taken the essential role of raising funds and budgeting for new textbooks, supplies, and school beautification projects (Bwonda 2005). In this respect, local communities have extensive experience in the administrative duties that would be required from them under HGSFP.

CONCLUSIONS

The effects of the school meal program on the wellbeing of rural Kenyans cannot be overstated. Through providing daily meals, schools are able to meet immediate food needs, provide future safety nets, and offer long-term assistance and empowerment to children, families, and communities. As the WFP prepares its exit strategy from the region as the main agent of school feeding, much care should be undertaken in ensuring that the transitional period be free of potential crises. If HGSP has a secure foundation within Kenya with both funds and management sourced internally, the program will no longer need to rely on fluctuating and often conditional donor support (Espejo 2009). In addition, a successful transfer of the food provision program to the Kenyan government would foster inter-ministerial cooperation and involvement and better integrate the program with a wide range of national and economic goals.

In order to effect lasting positive change in the lives of Kenyan children, the government must instate policies that work toward achievable goals. If the Kenyan government hopes to ensure the success of Free Primary Education, there must be considerable and consistent investment in programs that increase educational access, participation, and quality,

especially among the most vulnerable and historically marginalized social groups (Vos 2004). In addition to supporting programs like HGSFP, the ministries of Education and Agriculture must also invest in rural infrastructure by building roads and schools, improve agricultural capabilities by improving irrigation systems, farming technologies, and indigenous plant knowledge, and allocate more funds for basic school supplies and new teachers (UNESCO 2005). Without these necessary additions to the current system, the rewards of FPE will remain elusive for a large and promising segment of the Kenyan population.

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Arid conditions pose problems for agriculture
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