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Towards Sustainable School Meals

A review of Kenya's school meals program

Policy Brief

Summary

Kenya faces challenges in meeting the demand for nutritious food in the face of increasing population, resource scarcity, and climate pressures. For over 45 years, Kenya has implemented a school meal program (SMP) for primary aged children. The SMP uses a homegrown school feeding (HGSF) approach by sourcing food mainly from local smallholder farmers and producers. While these efforts have resulted in increased school enrollment and attendance, there is little empirical evidence on the ability of the SMP to deliver healthy and nutritious foods to schools in Kenya.

This policy brief includes findings from a recent analysis of existing government policies and SMP modalities in Kenya. It includes an overview of the current school meals landscape, key results, and recommendations for improving school meal delivery.

Key Results

- The SMP is mainly funded by the government, but financing is not anchored in policy, lacks clear capitation, and is marked by delayed and unpredictable disbursements; parent contributions are minimal due to unclear guidelines.
- Meals lack fruits, vegetables, and animal products.
- Procurement guidelines do not facilitate local community or women's participation.
- All models rely heavily on sponsor goodwill, with limited long-term sustainability in funding, operations, and food delivery.



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Context

In Kenya, the SMP is a critical safety net to reach, protect and build the resilience of Kenya's most vulnerable populations; particularly in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) (GOK, Auditor-General Kenya, 2023). The program currently reaches about 2.6 million children, but the government has committed to scaling the program to reach 10 million children by 2030.

The SMP in Kenya is underpinned by a number of key policies and strategies. For instance, the Kenya Constitution (2010)—which recognizes food as a human right under the Bill of Rights, the Kenya Vision 2030 (GoK, 2007)—which envisages high quality of life to all Kenyans, and the National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy (GoK, 2017b)—which was developed to guide the implementation of Kenya's School Meals in alignment with the Kenya Constitution (2010) and Bottom-up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) of the Kenyan Government. Together, these policies aim to transform Kenya into a newly industrialized, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens by the year 2030.

Though these policies provide broad guidelines on school meals, the gap between policy and practice remains wide. Context specific factors that contribute to the ways in which particular school food policy initiatives are experienced at the school level have not been well documented.

Intervention and Impact

The objective of this study was to analyze existing school feeding policies and models in Kenya and suggest sustainable approaches that have the potential to accelerate the delivery of healthy and nutritious foods.

To achieve these objectives, exploratory quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data on specific SMP variables from education officers, head teachers, farmers, non-profit organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, and agriculture extension workers involved with any SMP models in Kenya. The variables analyzed in the study were selected based on the prior

work of Kristjansson et al. that reviewed the effectiveness of school feeding across the globe (2022). The variables included topics related to school food supply chain structures, performance and ownership, children's diets, local farmer participation, gender integration, and school food policies.

Findings

The study identified four main SMP models in Kenya—including cash transfer, food distribution, parent–NGO supported, and centralized kitchen models. The analysis examined each model's funding mechanisms, stakeholder participation, contribution to children's dietary diversity, and prospects for long-term sustainability. Key findings are listed below:

FUNDING

- The government is the main source of funding for both cash transfer and food distribution models.
- In parent–NGO supported and centralized kitchen models, schools reported a reluctance of parents to contribute due to lack of policy guidelines on parents' contribution.
- SMP funding is not anchored in policy.
- The number of students requiring funding for school meals per model is unknown.
- Disbursement of funds to schools is often delayed and the amounts are unpredictable.

DIETARY DIVERSITY

- School meals are not being supplemented with fruits, vegetables, or animal products.
- Most schools have parcels of land which lay idle and could be cultivated to produce healthy food if used effectively.

COMMUNITY AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

- The SMP is mainly operated by the government with little participation of parents and smallholder farmers.
- Current procurement guidelines are not aligned to enable the participation of communities or the integration of women as producers and suppliers.

SUSTAINABILITY

- All SMP models function on principles of good will from sponsors and therefore cannot be guaranteed to receive long term funding or support for operations and food delivery.

Policy engagement

The results of the study were shared at a national policy round table event in Nairobi, Kenya. The event gathered stakeholders from local and national governments, civil society organizations, international and local NGOs, farmer groups, parents and schools. The event raised awareness on the issues related to current SMP delivery and offered a platform for discussing policy action around school-driven food systems transformation.



Stakeholders gathered at a school farm after the national policy round table event. Credit: Dr. Simon Omondi, KALRO

As a result of this work, a coalition of partnerships was established and a pilot intervention was agreed. The intervention plans to establish climate-smart learning centers in schools alongside school garden programs with the aim of enhancing dietary diversity, gender empowerment, and localized partnerships in schools in pastoralist communities in Kenya.

Looking forward

The ability for Kenya's SMP models to deliver healthy and nutritious foods to schools must be underpinned by policy and regulatory frameworks that specify budgetary allocation, community participation and ownership, and coordinated government response. Based on the findings of this study and from the national policy round table event, this study recommends that school gardens policies be implemented to enable schools to produce their own foods and supplement external funding. This would require local stakeholders to mobilize financial and technical resources.

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