

ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL MEALS AND NUTRITION STRATEGY IN KENYA'S WESTERN REGION**Odhiambo, Grace Akinyi, PhD**

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Abstract

Good nutrition across all stages of life is essential for maintaining good health, enhancing quality of life, and supporting the development of a strong and productive society. School meal programmes offer multiple benefits, not only to learners but also to the broader community. This study evaluated the inclusivity and effectiveness of the formulation, adoption, and implementation of the Kenya National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy in the Western Region of Kenya. Specifically, it aimed to: (1) assess the level of awareness and knowledge of the policy among key stakeholders, (2) determine the extent of its implementation, and (3) identify the challenges facing its implementation, along with potential solutions. The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional qualitative design, using purposive and quota sampling techniques to select 95 information-rich respondents from relevant county and sub-county government ministries. Participants were chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the study objectives. Data were collected through interviews, thematically analysed, coded, and presented using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that 87.6% of key informants were aware of the policy, although 33.8% indicated a need for a dedicated financial support framework to ensure successful implementation. Despite challenges, 88.6% reported that many schools (62.2%) had adopted various strategies to advance the goals of the policy. Additionally, 78.2% of schools were relying on parental contributions to sustain school meals and nutrition programmes. The study concludes that while the existence of a national policy is a critical step, its success depends on the presence of a supportive environment, including adequate funding, stakeholder engagement, and community participation.

Keywords: Evaluation, School Meals, Nutrition Policy.**INTRODUCTION**

The National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy is a program for Kenya developed by the school health, nutrition and meals coordination unit at the Ministry of Education, with inputs from partnering ministries, counties, sub counties, schools, development agencies and nongovernmental organizations and other developmental organizations. It takes into account policies formulated by sectors with cross cutting interests in school meals such as education, health, social protection and agriculture (National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy, 2017). There is strong evidence that school meals have multiple benefits, not only to the child but also to the community. In general, school meals in Kenya have been established to have a significant positive effect on education indicators, as well as a significant and positive contribution to

reducing hunger and to improve the nutritional intake. Enrolment and attendance rates as well as primary completion rates have been found to be higher in schools with meals (World Food Programme, 2011).

School meals should not only strive to alleviate short-term hunger but should also meet the nutritional needs of children. This is key to their growth and development. Nutrition contributes to the economic, social and human development. Good nutrition throughout the lifecycle is a prerequisite to good health, as it adds to the quality of life and is the foundation of a strong and productive society. Policy implementation refers to the mechanisms, resources, and relationships that link health policies to program action (Calista, 1994). To begin with a policy implementation assessment it is logical to start with the policy itself. The policy's content, formulation process, and extent of its dissemination influence whether the required basic preparatory tasks that form a foundation of policy are in place to support effective implementation. Policy content should clearly frame the underlying problem area, the policy's goals and objectives, and the population to be benefited, along with the broad actions and strategies to address the problem. That is, what actions that have been adopted by a person, group, or government, or the set of principles on which they are based (Bryson and Crosby, 2005).

The formulation process also matters. According to Marc et al. 2005, a policy designed without meaningful stakeholder engagement may be more difficult to implement because it does not consider the needs of nor engender buy-in and ownership from those who will implement or "benefit" from the policy. Furthermore, Marland 1995 explains that policies that result in new programs, services, or operational guidelines need to be disseminated to and understood by those people responsible for implementing and using them. If the public is going to access services or benefits brought about by a new policy, it must also be made aware of any new provisions and programs.

Thus, for a policy to support effective implementation, it should address the underlying problem through appropriate policy action; be based on strong stakeholder involvement; and be followed by dissemination to key audiences. This study sought to establish whether the policy formulation, adoption and implementation of school meal and nutrition policy was all inclusive and what is the level of implementation and in addition what are the challenges that key implementers could be facing and how can they be addressed. Assessing policy implementation is important as it promotes accountability by holding policymakers and implementers accountable for achieving stated goals and by reinvigorating commitment, enhances effectiveness because understanding and addressing barriers to policy implementation can improve program delivery and fosters equity and quality because effective policy implementation can establish minimum standards for quality and promote access, reducing inconsistencies among service providers and regions (Bhuyan, Jorgensen and Sharma, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The national school meals and nutrition strategy 2017- 2022 has seen its implementation since 2017. It has been in action for two years now. Since 2008, Kenya has faced problems attributed to frequent droughts, high cost of domestic food production and displacement of farmers during the post-election violence 2007 (USAID, 2014). Each year 2 to 4 million people are in need of external food aid (World Health Organization, 2017). Under nutrition contributes to an estimated one third of all deaths among children under five years old (Kenya Demographic Health Survey, 2014). Kenya's commitment to improving nutrition is established in vision 2030, aligned to the government's broader medium term development plan. The government of Kenya further approved the National Nutrition Action Plan 2012 (Ministry of Health, 2012).

According to Bhuyan, Jorgensen and Sharma (2010), policies are "living documents." They require various inputs to help them fulfill their goals. These inputs include clear guidelines and implementation plans, strong leadership, multisectoral stakeholder involvement, adequate and accessible resources, and effective feedback and monitoring systems. The national school meals and nutrition strategy, was developed to guide the implementation of Kenya's school meals initiatives at pre-primary and primary school, abiding by the broad national goals stipulated in the country's vision 2030 and in line with the Kenyan constitution 2010 (National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy, 2017). The strategy builds on existing policies to forge a national school meals framework. The universal access to free and compulsory education is an important section of the Kenyan constitution which provides mandate for school meals by stipulating in article 53b and c which stated that every child has a right to free and compulsory basic education and c which states right to basic nutrition, shelter and healthcare (The Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

According to the Ministry of Agriculture Livestock and Fisheries strategic plan 2013-2017, it was estimated that 47% of the country's population is food insecure and about 2 million people are in constant need of food relief with the figure rising to 4 million during drought and floods. In some regions, per-capita food availability has dropped by 10%, food price inflation averaged 11% annually with peaks of up to 26%. School meals are considered an important safety net for vulnerable children from food insecure household communities. (World Food Program, 2017). 2009 saw the government launching the homegrown school meals program through which MoE was to transfer funds to schools for purchase of ingredients and provision of hot meals to over 900,000 school children. The number of children supported rose from 540,000 in 2009 to 900,000 in 2016 and continues to grow as donor's support reduces. Through the National school meals and Nutrition strategy, net enrolment and primary school completion rates in arid counties average 34% and 35% respectively. The government ownership and capacity to implement National School Meals and Nutrition program is critical to sustainability (World Food Program, 2010). This study will therefore seek to know the level of implementation of the National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy in the Western region of Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive cross sectional qualitative design. Western Region is located in the Western part Kenya and borders Vihiga county to the south, Siaya county to the West, Trans Nzoia counties to the North and Nandi and Uasin Gishu counties to the East. Key informants from the ministries of Health, Agriculture, Education and social protection were used. They were drawn from county and sub county levels of administrative units. Purposive and quota sampling technique were used where information rich persons were sampled in counties and sub counties of relevant ministries. They were selected based on the characteristics of the population and the objectives of the study. 95 key informants were interviewed.

Yamane Method (1967) was used to determine the sample size of the study n

$$= \frac{N}{1 + N e^2}$$

n - Sample size

N - the size of the population

e - Margin of error 5%

$$\frac{124}{1 + 124(0.0025)} = 95$$

The study used researcher administered questionnaire guide with both open ended and closed ended questions. Consent in participation in the study was sought. The researcher also protected the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents on the research at any point they feel like withdrawing as is their right. Data collected was used to formulate key themes for analysis, coded and finally percentages were used to present the final report and findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted between July to August 2019 in three counties of Western region. The three counties were Bungoma, Busia and Kakamega. A total of 95 key informants' interviews were conducted. The key informants were drawn from both policymakers and policy implementers. A total of 39 (Bungoma 13, Busia 11 and Kakamega 15) key informants were policy makers and 56 (Bungoma 18, Busia 15 and Kakamega 23) were policy implementers. All policy makers (41.1%) of the total key informants interviewed reported that they were involved in the policy formulation. Among the policy makers, Kakamega represented 38.5%, Bungoma 33.3% while Busia had the least with 28.2%. For policy implementers, 32.1%, 26.8% and 41.1% were drawn from Bungoma, Busia and Kakamega respectively.

For implementers, the team included departmental level officials at the county and sub county levels in department of education, agriculture and nutrition. Official from county represented 14.4% and 85.6% were from sub county level. Largely, 87.6% of the key informants were aware of the policy, and they found the policy content to be relevant and sufficient in addressing health and nutrition challenges among the school going children. It important to note that 33.8% of the key informants felt that the policy needed a financial support framework which was largely lacking and the counties are struggling to seek resources and allocate to the programme. So far, Kakamega County alone had indicated a possibility of financial support from county government. Despite of the challenges, 88.6% of the key informants reported that many (62.2%) schools had adopted various strategies to help them realize the goals of the National School Meals and Nutrition Programme. Forty seven percent of the respondents reported that

the policy is being implemented partially though not the way it was envisioned by the policy makers but it is addressing the key issues of school meals and nutrition programme. It was reported that 68.1% contribution is in terms of monetary, while 23.4 % is in terms of food items mainly cereals and legumes and the remaining percentage (8.5%) is in terms of labor and non-food items like firewood and soap. It is important to note that according to Alesch and Petak 2001, policies are not always implemented as envisioned and in addition, the results achieved are not always what were intended. In addition, 87.4% of the implementers and 93.2% of the policy formulators expressed relatively less confidence that the goals could be achieved as intended because the responsibility for implementing the policy lacked clearly defined roles and resource allocation. Seventy four percent (74.2%) of the implementers reported that involvement of the beneficiary groups in policy implementation has the greatest opportunity that has been explored to realize the little success stories of the programme. The policy lacked resource allocation and defined sources of funding to implement the policy and this has been the biggest challenge, this was reported by 72.8% of policy implementers and 100% of the policy makers.

Regardless of the funding challenges, 78.2% of the key informants reported that there has been positive achievement made since the inception of the policy. Many (84.2%) recounted that the programme has provided both educational and health benefits to the most vulnerable children, which has resulted in increased enrollment rates, reduced absenteeism, and improved food security at the household level. Further to improvements in accessing food, 57.8% of the key informants reported that school feeding program has also had a positive influence on nutritional status, gender equity, and educational status, each of which adds to improving overall levels of country and human development. With all these benefits, parents and other key stakeholders like teachers have been inspired to continued advocating, promoting and supporting the programme despite the many challenges.

About 23.8% of key informants reported that some schools have opted for kitchen gardening initiatives and 4K club activities at school to fill the gap of vegetables and legumes for school meals and nutrition programme. Though the initiatives positively impact on the programme but 92.4% of the implementers believe that a budgetary allocation and specified sources of funds for the programme enables the policy implementers to work towards achieving programme goal and objectives in well organized and systematic manner. This may further require discussions because according to WFP, 2017 countries are very limited on the demands placed on the staff, resources, and infrastructure required for school-feeding programs, and often have to rely on outside financial and personnel help to continue programs for a significant amount of time. This may not be sustainable.

Efforts to track the policy's implementation were reported as limited. This was reported by 88.4% of all key informants and it was due to the lack of an implementation plan that includes a framework for monitoring and evaluation. Though in terms of programme sustainability it was reported by 44.2% of key informants that initiatives put in place have positively contributes towards ensuring sustainable programme, 48.4% of the key informant differed with over the issue of sustainability and they were of the opinion that funding needed to be availed This was echoed by 52.6% of the programme policy makers and 34.3% of policy implementers.

According to WFP 2017, school feeding programs are community-specific and require a great deal of planning, the sustainability of school feeding programs is a main point of concern for many countries, but this can only be achieved through proper planning.

Though National School Meal programme has a number of benefits, there were concerns that were raised as challenges. Several (88.6%) of the key informants reported that parents shouldering the burden of school meals has increased the cost of schooling by about 18% this is in line with WFP 2017 report on school feeding programme especially the home grown one where it states that while school feeding programs have a variety of positive impacts, there are some possible negative impacts these programs can cause. The report emphasises that school feeding programs can increase the cost of schooling by requiring that communities provide fire-wood for cooking as well as other items such as fresh-fruit, vegetables, and condiments. Additionally, communities are also expected to provide people who can cook these meals and maintain stores of all of the required food products, as well as kitchens and other fundamentals of meal provision. By causing a variety of needs and requirements to increase in a given community, the net benefit to a community from school feeding programs may be reduced.

The report further states that school feeding programs are very context-specific, and each community's program must be altered based on the demographics, geography, and other patterns within and outside of schools. For this reason, there are a variety of challenges that emerge in the creation and implementation of school feeding programs. This needs to be considered as we continue implementing the national school meal programme as we do not homogenous communities in Kenya and therefore what works in one community may require some slight modifications to work in another community

CONCLUSIONS

Having a policy is not sufficient, a supportive environment is essential for realization of the policy goals and objectives. Resource allocation is crucial to realization of policy objectives. The benefits accompanying national school meal and nutrition programme can only be appreciated if the policy is implemented as it was envisioned by the policy formulators. Continuous monitoring could help to identify the policy implementation challenges and reorganization may help achieve the desired goals and objectives the policy.

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