ORIGINAL ARTICLE

PERCEPTION OF PARENTS ON THE NUTRITIONAL RELEVANCE OF SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The Home-Grown School Feeding Program (HGSFP) was deemed a truly nutritious and educationally beneficial initiative upon its reintroduction. It was commendable considering the unstable state of the economy and the substandard domestic living conditions brought on by multifaceted poverty. To increase the nutritious intake of at least 2.5 million school-age children, the HGSFP set out to serve a meal a day in 2004. The targeted group at the time made up roughly 10% of all elementary school students. Perhaps not enough consideration has been given to whether the program's sustainability and implementation strategy are appropriate for achieving the program's two main goals of raising students' nutritious intake and learning outcomes. Therefore, it became imperative to ascertain the degree to which respondents believed the school feeding program had improved students' nutritional status in basic schools and to investigate the degree to which parents believed the program had improved students' academic performance. While adopting the survey research design the respondents were drawn from among parents randomly selected and served with a structured questionnaire. Findings indicated that inherent challenges with the manner of implementation have made the HGSFP not serve the envisaged purpose of enhancing pupils' nutrition and learning. It was recommended that the government should ensure proper implementation of HGSFP to enable the essence of the program which has to do with qualitative nutrition and academic outcomes to be continually achieved.

Keywords: Parents, School-feeding, pupils' nutrition/health, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

The prevailing multi-dimensional poverty, ever-increasing double-digit inflation on staple food prices as well as recent removal of subsidies on petroleum products have exacerbated the quality of principal meals of average households in Nigeria in recent times. It was admirable that the Home-Grown School Feeding Program (HGSFP) was reinstated. Under the direction of the Nigerian Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs, HGSFP functioned as a true educational initiative. In light of Nigeria's unstable economy and the living conditions of the average household, the HGSFP can be deemed an admirable initiative. Furthermore, HGSFP was integrated into the Federal Government of Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, which was created by an Act in 2004. It was intended to improve the nutritional intake of at least 2.5 million school-age children by providing them with one meal a day. The targeted group at the time made up roughly 10% of all elementary school students. These were the focus of a staged pilot rollout that started with 13 of the 36 states (1) but was later discontinued.

However, under a new administration in 2015, it was relaunched, but the suitability of the implementation approach and sustainability of the program to continually achieve the objective of improving pupils' nutritional intake perhaps have not been exhaustively interrogated. It was intended that the HGSFP would boost enrollment, which would help reduce childhood malnutrition among school-age children and absorb some of Nigeria's enormous number of out-of-school children. One prepared meal every day for every child was the goal of the HGSFP. Meals were cooked for an average of fifty students by a cook, sometimes known as a "food vendor." 40% of the program's food budget is allocated to protein purchases (poultry, chicken, and eggs) to satisfy the menu's dietary criteria. The program purchases these foods through consolidated farmer organizations at regional distribution centers. The remaining 60% is used to purchase staple foods, both perishable and non-perishable, as well as other important necessities like fruit and vegetables (1, 2).

In addition, the HGSFP aimed to improve the nutritional and health status of schoolchildren, boost enrollment, retention, and completion rates; encourage the creation of jobs, the production of locally produced goods, and the income-generating activities of local farmers; lower the rate of poverty; and promote the growth of small and medium-sized businesses. The HGSFP will enhance schoolchildren's health and learning conditions, increasing each student's potential for future earnings. As a result, the program may also offer a regulated market for regional agricultural output, strengthening local economies through resource redistribution among the different areas where the schoolchildren reside. Governments can thus invest in the long-term growth of students as well as the overall economic development of the community through school feeding programs.

Though commendable, the degree to which these goals were met hasn't been specifically questioned. Therefore, it was important to ascertain whether the program's nutritional and educational goals had been met from the parent's point of view. It was intended that every student in primary schools owned by the state would receive one meal every day at the very least.

However, at the onset of the program in 2004, the Federal Ministry of Education appeared to have exercised cautious optimism about the success of the program at a full-blown national scale. Therefore, the effort was designed and implemented in stages. It was first piloted in 13 selected states from the six geo-political zones in Nigeria, which included: Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory). Bauchi; Cross River; Enugu; Imo; Kano; Kebbi; Kogi; Rivers; Ogun; Osun; Nasarawa; and Yobe states, however, that pilot program as with such similar programs in developing countries flopped (3-6).

Home-Grown School Feeding Programs serve as an example of the importance of education and educational institutions to the nation's long-term growth. The 1998 National Food and Nutrition Policy (NFNP) should be supplemented by the NHGSFP as a critical first step in tackling the issue of undernourishment. The program outlined specific goals, such as a 30% reduction in severe and moderate malnutrition among school-age children by 2010 and a 50% reduction in micronutrient deficiencies, primarily related to iron, vitamin A, and iodine, by the same year (6, 7). The policy's fortification of basic foods with vitamin A was one of its most significant features; the idea was that school-age children would naturally get their vitamin A from their diet. Large-

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scale producers and importers of staple foods took advantage of this policy provision, leading to the market's sale of 70% sugar, 100% wheat flour, and 55% vegetable oil fortified with vitamin A.

Maize flour is now also fortified with Vitamin A, while wheat and maize flour is also fortified with iron and salt with iodine. These are some ways in which the issues of micronutrient deficiencies have been and are being managed in a way that the underprivileged and hunger victims succeed in developing nations (8, 9). However, the big question remains the percentage of school-age children who access these vitamin-fortified foods.

Unfortunately, the cost of some staple foods, such as rice, beans, flour/wheat, grains, and other food items, skyrocketed. This was caused by the Federal Government of Nigeria's 2019 land border closure, insecurity brought on by ongoing conflicts between farmers and herders, and smallholder farmers' poor resistance to climate change. It is significant to remember that the cost of these essentials affects the likelihood that school-age children in Nigeria would have access to reasonably priced, nutrient-fortified staple foods. These foods are invariably those that Nigerian households cannot do without daily. Recall that domestic cultivation and processing of these food items were largely ignored since the oil boom era, creating room for much dependence on external supply by a greater percentage of ordinary Nigerian households struggling with staple food inflation and with dwindling crude oil output and prices, food insecurity is being exacerbated.

School-age children are the most vulnerable to poor nutrition with life-long consequences inseparably linked with the pupils' childhood cognitive development. School feeding program is a necessary policy instrument to tackle malnutrition which is an outcome of food deprivation and disease (10-12). However, any person or group of persons in society could suffer various deprivations, especially as regards dietary requirements, which may tend to affect the optimum development of the body systems which may allow the easy onset of any disease. The prevailing socio-economic situations and resultant poverty contribute to the inability of parents to provide adequate dietary intake for members of a household and school-age children with varying attendant cognitive and physical developmental consequences, (13, 14).

The HGSFP has appropriate potential for both community involvement in school food programs and the cognitive development of students. These concerns had to be taken into account when implementing the school feeding program. To find out how parents felt about the policy's continuation and the nutritional value of school feeding programs in Nigeria, the study looked into how parents felt about the program's nutritional value in the country today. The study specifically aimed to: i. ascertain the degree to which respondents believed the school feeding program had improved students' nutritional status in basic schools; and ii. investigate the degree to which parents believed the school feeding program had improved students' academic performance.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions;

i. To what extent have school feeding programs aided pupils' nutritional status in basic schools from parents' perspectives?
ii. what is the extent to which school feeding programs enhanced pupils' academic performance in basic schools?

Literature Review

It is observed that a lack of minimum dietary in meals increases the chances of malnutrition in terms of micronutrient deficiencies and the most common micronutrient insufficiencies are iron, iodine, vitamin A, and zinc (15, 16). Specifically, in Nigeria, at least 2 out of every 5 children are not taking foods rich in Vitamin A, while about 3 out of every 5 children are not taking foods rich in iron (Fig 1).

Inadequate diet and associated dangers have not decreased, as seen in Fig 1. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to have the highest rate of child mortality in the world, according to NDHS (17), despite a gradual drop in the worldwide rate of child mortality. Children who are malnourished, especially those who suffer from severe acute malnutrition, are more likely to die from common childhood illnesses such as malaria, pneumonia, and diarrhea. Indeed, the most susceptible age group to illnesses is extremely young children (15). About 45% of deaths in children under the age of five in various parts of Africa are connected to nutrition; Nigeria is ranked 174th out of 180 countries worldwide on the child flourishing index. Only the Central African Republic (180th), Chad (179th), Somalia (178th), Niger (177th), Mali (176th), and Guinea (175th) are ranked lower than Nigeria. The geometric mean of a child's survival and thriving is known as the child flourishing index. This demonstrates how

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vulnerable African children are to food insecurity as a result of conflicts (18). The issue of mitigating malnutrition is global food security and health priority (18,19The truth is that while Nigeria is increasing school-age children's nutrition, the present rate of improvement might not be sufficient to meet the global objective set by the World Health Organization to reduce malnutrition by 2025.

Children under the age of five are not included in these types of initiatives, as they are primarily targeted at school-age children in many developing nations such as Nigeria. This is regarded as one of the program's weaknesses as a nutritional safety net for the Food for Education (FFE) initiative. The first thousand days of a child's existence, starting from conception, are crucial and are when undernutrition may have the worst effects. This has been noted and scientifically proven. Nutritional treatments that take place during this developmental stage have a far greater influence on a child's chances of survival, well-being, and development (4, 20). It has been noted that the FFE program should be regarded and classified as educational interventions rather than nutritional interventions due to the greater impact that pre-natal and pre-school programs may have and their higher cost-benefit ratios. This is to avoid undermining budgetary resource allocations for nutritional interventions in these programs (15).

Potential Outcomes of School Feeding on School-Age Children

In certain regions of the nation, and almost all urban and metropolitan centers in particular, the number of children who are of school age is quickly surpassing the facilities and capacities for well-coordinated and non-fortified school food (1, 3, 21). Take-home rations and the in-school feeding program are the two main ways that food is distributed in school feeding programs across the globe. Take-home rations are given to students to eat at home as long as they attend class, whereas in-school feeding programs serve meals or snacks to students while they are in class. The food served to students under the in-school feeding program may be prepared on-site or packaged in advance. According to Bundy et al. (8), a government's school feeding program must adhere to a set of standards, with a focus on policy frameworks. These frameworks provide governments with the authority and capacity to take on greater responsibility for school feeding programs, which in turn improves educational achievement by supplying food for students and offers more incentives to participate in formal education. More time spent in school, improved school attachment, and increased learning time are the results of this. The second way is by reducing temporary hunger, which enhances kids' cognitive abilities and attention span. The third route involves improving children's nutritional status by giving them extra calories and nutrients in addition to their regular diet—something that some homes would not have done otherwise. This leads to better health and better resistance to infectious diseases and illnesses that would keep children from attending school (5). Improved nutrition raises children's attendance at school, which in turn raises academic achievement. The process is not linear, though, and a nation may advance in one area while maintaining capacity disparities in another. Mainstreaming school feeding into national policies and plans, national financing, and national implementation competence are necessary to move toward sustainable national programs (8). These capacity needs frequently exceed those of the line ministries in charge of the program, such as education or local government. They include, but are not limited to, proficiency in large-scale food transportation and procurement, handling regular financial disbursements, food preparation, guaranteeing food safety and nutritional quality, and monitoring and assessment.

Unquestionably, one of the main goals of school meals for underprivileged families and their school-age children-including the malnourished-is to increase the motivation to attend and remain connected to schools. School canteens were linked to higher student enrollment, regular attendance, continually reduced repetition rates, lower dropout rates in underprivileged districts, and improved success rates on national exams, according to a recent review of an ongoing school food program in Burkina Faso. The impact of a small experimental school feeding Burkina Faso on enrollment and attendance was assessed. Comparing the three months to control schools, there was a 5% increase in enrollment and a 36% improvement in attendance/absenteeism (22).

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design with a multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted for quantitative data collection. The respondents were randomly selected from Parent Teachers Association meeting attendance lists in the schools selected for the study. A total of 260 parents were randomly selected from the PTA list in selected schools. These served as

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respondents and their responses were obtained through the use of the Programme Relevance & Adequacy Questionnaire (PRAQ) which was designed and validated for the study. The questionnaire was meant for the head of the household, in a patriarchal society like ours, there were few women too, who were administered with the PRAQ, as the head of the household. The retrieved questionnaire that was properly entered and used for analysis was 250 while some others were returned either blank or not properly filled.

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RESULTS

In consideration of the of extent perceived relevance of school feeding programs in aiding the reduction of short-term hunger in pupils in basic schools, as indicated in Table 3: school feeding program was adjudged relevant to children's schooling desire (attachment to schooling) with a mean value of (0.79) being of very low extent according to the decision criteria. The item on school feeding program as a source of excitement to the children's desire to be in school regularly had a mean value of (0.89) indicating a very low extent. However, on the item that school feeding program makes children concentrate in classes and further readings (2.88) moderate extent will indicate that HGSFP was good in aiding concentration in the classroom, Moreover, respondents were certain that school feeding programs could aid pupil's micro-nutrients and families' food securities (3.12) to a moderately high extent but did not perceive school feeding program as being implemented well presently. The HGSFP presently has not improved pupils' health physical well-being and nutrition status. Parents' perception (0.81) indicated a very low extent.

On the extent to which school feeding program was relevant to pupil's academics, it had (0.78) indicating a very low extent, however, parents did perceive the introduction of school feeding to have aided improved academic performances (2.69) moderately high extent but did not see it so, on pupil's health and academics are improved (1.83) indicating a very low extent. However, parents perceived that the school feeding program led to a reduction in pupils' school truancy (2.91) to a moderately (high) extent but did agree that the school feeding program is well received and administered by officials (0.92) to a very low extent.

DISCUSSIONS

The extent of the perceived relevance of the school feeding program in aiding pupils' attachment to basic school was considered by parents not to be relevant to children's school attendance and attachments to schooling, with a mean value of (0.79) to a very low extent according to the decision criteria. (1, 16). So, the relevance of school feeding in enhancing pupils' attachment to schooling as a precursor to learning was necessary but not sufficient, in the reduction of pupils' school truancy behaviors, and did not necessarily lead to improved academic performances; the respective roles of single and multiple influences on individual development were noted in Davis, Kreisman, & Musaddiq, (9). However, it was envisaged that a well-managed school feeding program would ultimately lead to qualitative academic output and could facilitate national development via qualitative academic outcomes (10, 16, 23).

CONCLUSION

The re-introduction of school feeding initiatives in Nigeria represents a good intervention by the government. However, the present approach in implementation may have sent wrong signals to parents. Specifically, from the findings of this report parents have not perceived HGSFP as relevant any longer for child development. Though a veritable program; given the present-day economic realities whereby millions of children go to school hungry every day, inherent challenges with the manner of implementation have made the HGSFP not have served the purpose as envisaged in 2004, when it began through the Federal Government of Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme.

Recommendations

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Given the findings the following recommendations were made;

i. The operators of the HGSFP should ensure proper implementation of HGSFP to enable the essence of the program which has to do with qualitative nutrition and academic outcomes to be continually achieved.
ii. It was found that parents have lost confidence in the relevance of the HGSFP, therefore, efforts geared at restoring the relevance of the program for the benefit of parents and pupils with the escalating food insecurity problem have become a necessity. Hence, measures that can ensure that the relevance of the program is restored will be worthwhile.
iii. It was found that parents perceived that school feeding programs led to a reduction in pupils' school truancy and this was very encouraging given the escalating problem of truancy and an ever-increasing number of out-of-school children.
iv. Moreover, the respondents indicated that they were certain that the school feeding program could aid the family's food nutrients and food security given the ravaging inflationary pressure on staple food according to the consumer price index from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics. Ensuring proper implementation of the HGSFP will take the pressure away from the various households.
v. As a greater percentage of parents as respondents have considered that government policy had performed poorly, that calls for a conscientious effort of the operators of the systems, programs, and institutions of government to deliver the expected dividend of government policies and programs.

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TABLES

Table 1: Sample Frame Selection of Respondents

	Physical Location of the Basic Schools	State	Number of Schools	Samples
1.	Respondents from urban basic schools	Osun	3	90
2.	Respondents from rural basic schools	Osun	2	50
3.	Respondents from urban basic schools	Ogun	3	90
4.	Respondents from rural basic school	Ogun	2	50
	Total respondents			260

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic characteristics

Respondents Demographics	Frequency	%
Gender of the head of households		
Male	219	87.6
Female	31	12.4
Total	250	100.0
Head of households' monthly income (Naira)		
Less 40,000	33	13.2
40,000 – 49,000	110	44.0
50,000 – 59,000	91	36.4
60,000 and above	16	6.4
Total	250	100.0
Household Size (total number of dependents)		
Less than 3 persons	39	15.6
3 - 5 persons	180	72.0
6 and above	31	12.4
Total	250	100.0

Table 3: The Extent of School Feeding Aided Pupils' Nutritional Status

	School Feeding & Pupils Nutrition	VH (%)	H (%)	M (%)	L (%)	VL (%)	x	Decision
1	**School feeding program usually excites the children's desire to be in school regularly**	**29(11.6)**	**31(13.0)**	**45(18.0)**	**54 (21.4)**	**91(36.0**	**0.79**	**VLE**
2	**The school HGSFP was relevant in eliminating children's hunger in short term**	**27(10.8)**	**33(13.2)**	**41(16.4.)**	**59 (23.6)**	**90(36.0)**	**0.89**	**VLE**
3	**The HGSFP reduces malnutrition-**	**46(18.4)**	**56(22.4)**	**60 (24.0)**	**46(18.4)**	**44(17.5)**	**2.88**	**ME**

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	induced restlessness & aids concentration in classes							
4	**The HGSFP is aiding pupil's micro-nutrients & families' food securities**	**43(17.2)**	**58(22.4)**	**60(24.0)**	**49(19.1)**	**42(16.8)**	**3.12**	**ME**
5	**The HGSFP presently has improved pupil's health physical well-being and nutrition status**	**21(8.4)**	**39(15.6)**	**40(16.0)**	**60(24.0)**	**89(35.6)**	**0.81**	**VLE**

Very High extent (4.01–5.00), High extent (3.01–4.00), Moderate extent (2.01–3.00), Low extent (1.01–2.00), Very Low extent (0.01–1.00)

Table 4: The Extent of School Feeding Enhancement of Pupils' Academic Performance

S/N	School feeding & Academic outcome	**VH (%)**	**H (%)**	**M (%)**	**L (%)**	**VL (%)**	**x**	**Decision**
1	The introduction of the school feeding program was relevant to my child's academics	21(8.4)	39(15.6)	40(16.0)	60(24.0)	89(35.6)	0.78	VLE
2	Since the introduction of school feeding academic performances have improved	43(17.2)	58(22.4)	60(24.0)	46(18.4)	45(17.9)	2.69	ME
3	Through school feeding programmes pupils' health and academics are improved	29(11.6)	31(13.0)	45(18.0)	54 (21.4)	91(36.0	1.83	LE
4	School feeding programs led to a reduction in pupils' school truancy	42(16.8)	60(24.0)	58(22.4)	49(19.1)	43(17.2)	2.91	ME
5	The school feeding program is well received & administered by officials	27(10.8)	33(13.2)	41(13.0.)	59 (23.6)	90(36.0)	0.92	VLE

***Very High extent (4.01–5.00), High extent (3.01–4.00), Moderate extent (2.01–3.00), Low extent (1.01–2.00), Very Low extent (0.01–1.00) *x= mean**

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