

Implementation and Monitoring of School Feeding Programmes in Mberengwa District of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of United Nations sustainable goal number four represents a global concern for quality and inclusive education. The goal aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015). To meet the targets of sustainable development goal number four, schools must be inclusive, healthy, physically safe, emotionally, and psychologically enabling. A school must control and minimise threats to child friendly environments. Threats include food and water insecurity, undernutrition, gender discrimination, and chronic poverty. It is against this background that developing countries have initiated school feeding programmes. The government of Zimbabwe, supported by UNICEF and the WFP developed the school nutrition guidelines to improve nutrition in schools. Apart from implementing the school nutrition programme as a tool to fight hunger and starvation, the programme aimed at boosting school attendance and educational outcomes. The paper aims at assessing the implementation and monitoring of Zimbabwe's school feeding programme in Mberengwa District of Zimbabwe. It uses the qualitative methodology, interpretivist paradigm, and a case study design. Data is generated through interviews and focus group discussions. Parents, school heads, teachers-in-charge, and schools inspectors were purposively selected from seven primary schools, and Mberengwa district education office. The paper focuses on implementation and monitoring strategies and the role of different stakeholders in the school feeding programme. It further explores the challenges encountered in the implementation and monitoring of the school feeding programme. The paper makes recommendations on the establishment of robust policy mechanisms and increased government commitment to enhancing implementation and monitoring of the school feeding programme in the district. The challenges on the implementation and monitoring of the school feeding programme have wide implications on the development of learners as they come from diverse backgrounds. The provision of food and nutrition, security, safety, and a child friendly environment goes beyond the call of duty. It is a human rights issue.

Keywords: Implementation, Monitoring, Child friendly school, Inclusive education, School nutrition guidelines

INTRODUCTION

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number four emphasizes quality education, inclusive education, and education for sustainable development. For these education targets to be achieved, the other sixteen sustainable development goals must be addressed. Issues of poverty, malnutrition, hunger, health, and inequality must be addressed as they have a bearing on education for sustainable development. Zimbabwe Health policy (2018) emphasizes nutrition services in schools and the need to make them an integral part of the broader school feeding programme. The Zimbabwe school feeding programme policy provides a guide on the number of meals a learner must have while in school. The implementation of the school feeding programmes in rural schools has been characterised by an array of challenges. The paper seeks to assess the implementation and monitoring of the school feeding programmes in a rural district of Mberengwa in Zimbabwe.

Background to the study

Access to quality and inclusive education is a topical issue globally. The United Nations through sustainable goal number four requires governments to ensure the provisions of inclusive, equitable and quality education.

To support and achieve these goals and targets international agencies such as the United Nations, United Nations International Children's Education Fund, Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme have supported school feeding initiatives across developing countries, including Zimbabwe. Apart from improving nutrition, school feeding schemes have contributed to increases in school attendance, and improvement in learners academic performance.

The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) was launched to advance Education for All (EFA) and called on governments to develop education sector plans to support the achievement of EFA goals and their targets (Sarr et al., 2017). Despite, all these efforts, developing countries still face challenges towards full inclusion, equal access, and quality education. Factors that have been attributed to the failures are both political and economic. While it can be acknowledged that poverty is a reality in most developing countries due to low productivity and lack of economic growth and development, lack of political will has undermined education for sustainable development. Lack of development and lack of prioritisation, hunger and poverty have led to interventions by international agencies. The interventions are meant to alleviate the dangers of malnutrition in children in most developing countries. It must also be acknowledged that climate change, which has contributed to extreme floods, droughts and cyclones has impacted negatively on agricultural production which is the mainstay of the economies of developing countries. Reliance on donor support and international agencies interventions may not be sustainable eventually.

These factors have a ripple effect on school attendance, school performance and learning outcomes. They have contributed to school dropouts and child marriages. To address these challenges, the Zimbabwe government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education adopted the home-grown school feeding policy which promotes the use of locally sourced food to support both child nutrition and local agricultural development. The School Feeding Programme in Zimbabwe is characterised by the establishment of school business units, a nutritional focus, and community participation (UNICEF, 2025). Statutory Instrument 13 of 2025 made it mandatory for schools to provide food to learners, having adopted the School Feeding Programme in 2016 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2025). The legal framework aimed at supporting the implementation of the school feeding programme. Despite all these initiatives effective implementation and monitoring of the programme remain a challenge in most rural schools.

Statement of the problem

Despite sound policy framework supported by legal instruments, policy in most developing countries has been characterised by implementation paralysis. Practices that affect the effective implementation of the school feeding programme must be interrogated, as failure to implement and monitor the school feeding programme leads to nutritional deficiency and malnutrition in children. This compromises the effort to achieve education for sustainable development. The paper assesses the implementation and monitoring of the school feeding programme in a rural district of Zimbabwe.

Research questions

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent have schools established school business units to support school feeding programmes?
- How do parents play their roles in the school feeding programme?
- What are the attitudes of teachers, parents, and school heads on the implementation of the school feeding programme?
- What role does the district education inspectorate play in monitoring the school feeding programme?
- What challenges do schools face in the implementation of the school feeding programme?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School Feeding Programmes

School feeding involves providing food to children in schools. The school feeding programme in Zimbabwe is provided by government with support from development partners such as the United Nations, World Food

Programme, UNICEF, UNESCO among other local and international agencies. The programme aims at providing food in schools to improve nutrition, school attendance and learning outcomes. The programme serves as an important safety net to ensure every child has access to quality education, health, and nutrition (Barnabas et al., 2023). It is a tool to alleviate hunger and nutritional deficiency. The school feeding programmes may be cost effective through participation and involvement of the community. They have a variety of benefits that accrue to the school, community, and the learners. These include improved attendance, improved attention span, increased enrolment, and growth and development of children (UNESCO, 2023). Other benefits include avoiding hunger, improving household food security, increasing academic performance and contributing to gender equity in access to education, and providing a ready market for local farmers (Desalegn et al., 2022).

Home grown school feeding supports the local community, since the food that is consumed in schools is locally produced. It involves purchasing locally produced food to support communities and strengthen local food supply systems, since key principles of home grown feeding include local food procurement, smallholder engagement, nutrient-rich and diverse foods, and regularity in meal provision (Singh & Fernandes, 2018). Home grown school feeding links children's nutrition with local agriculture and this promotes agricultural production and dietary diversity for a local market. The home grown school feeding model promotes education for sustainable development and has been incorporated as one of the strategies of education for sustainable development aimed at addressing hunger and food insecurity problems (Desalegn et al., 2022).

School feeding programmes promote inclusivity in education. Inclusive education refers to education in which all children, including children with severe disabilities, have access to regular classrooms with adequate support (Ginja & Chen, 2023). Apart from physical disabilities, inclusivity in education addresses and responds to all the barriers that contribute to exclusion. Variables that contribute to exclusion in education include poverty, economic status, gender, and hunger. School feeding programmes address these challenges. Inclusion must be viewed in a wider sense that includes meeting the social, physiological, and academic needs of all learners and providing needed support. Inclusive education is multidimensional, and is based on the principle that local schools must care for all children regardless of social, emotional, cultural or intellectual difference or disability (Ginja & Chen, 2023).

A school feeding programme is a component of a child friendly school. Child friendly schools are an intervention that ensures every child is offered a safe place to learn, play and realize full potential (Manjo, 2024). Child friendly schools promote children's rights through community initiatives and engagement, address global needs of the child, support learners' capacities, enhance children's health, guarantee safety and security, and create an engaging environment (UNICEF, 2010). It is about acting in the best interest of the child, to promote quality education, and is based on the principles of democracy and education as a human right.

School feeding programmes have achieved tangible benefits in education that include reducing nutritional deficiency in children, healthier learners, high enrolment, improved learner performance, improved attendance, and increased school completion rates (Alderman & Behrman, 2004). However, there are an array of challenges that have been observed in the assessment of school feeding programmes. Chikuni (2023) observed that in Bulawayo Central district of Zimbabwe, the appreciation of the school feeding programme depended on the income levels of families. Low-income families appreciated the benefits of the school feeding programmes, while high-income families viewed it as a barrier to learning. The programme was viewed as a barrier to learning in the context of the demands for planning, preparation and the actual distribution of food which encroached into children's learning time. Other challenges noted include lack of sustainability because of dependence on external funding, lack of resources, corruption and mismanagement, limited community involvement, and excessive costs (Chikuni, 2023; Gelli et al, 2010).

The implementation of school feeding programmes

School feeding programmes are common in both developed and developing countries and aim at promoting children's nutrition. In Canada, it is referred to as the National School Food Programme and its aim is to provide every child with access to nutritious food through the provision of at least three meals a day (Michnik et al, 2023). The Brazilian National School Feeding Programme feeds all students enrolled in public schools, and has

achieved success in improving nutrition and food security, and is regarded as representing one of the largest and longest-standing food provision initiative in the world (Aragi et al., 2026). In Rwanda, implementation models depended on social context, for example refugee schools relied on international partners, and public schools depended on participation and involvement of parents and local communities. Community engagement, while it has its positives, it may contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities in institutions of learning. The contribution of a poor community may fail to address problems of malnutrition and food insecurity in schools as they may be limited by their socio-economic status. In the case of the Rwandan models, effective parental involvement enhanced programme ownership, while weak engagement led to inequities and inequalities in contributions (UNICEF, 2020). School Feeding Programmes in Nigeria provided one mid-day meal to learners, but they have been characterised by complains about the poor nutritional quality and quantity of the meals (Agu et al., 2023).

There are numerous factors that have affected the implementation of school feeding programmes in developing countries. While parental and community participation in programme implementation has contributed to improved nutrition and health, boosting the local economy, increased attendance, decline in drop-out rates and sustainability, it has also been characterised by resource constraints, volunteer burnout, lack of sustainability and lack of clearly defined policy frameworks. Other challenges that affect implementation of programmes in schools relate to storage facility in rural schools. Mmari, Momany & Wambiya (2025) observed some of the challenges in Kenya as insufficient and irregular parental contributions, widespread poverty among communities, limited funding, and poor food storage infrastructure leading to spoilage and waste.

Monitoring of school feeding programmes

Monitoring and evaluation practices are important aspects of project execution and management (Mwanthi et al., 2024) The concept encompasses planning, data dissemination, capacity building, and utilization of results and these assist in assessing the accomplishments and effectiveness of implemented programmes (Kabeyi, 2019). Monitoring and evaluation safeguard and protect the aims and objectives of the programme by ensuring that activities and processes are in tandem with programme goals. It is therefore important to have school feeding programmes assessed, monitored, and reviewed. Programme monitoring and evaluation is characterised by the use of clear objectives to assess performance, the need to inform the decision-making process and measure the effectiveness and impact of the programme. Impact can be measured in terms of how the programme has changed to lives of intended and unintended beneficiaries. Decisions that must be made because of monitoring and evaluation include improving the programme, terminating, or effecting structural, cultural, and technological changes to the programme. Monitoring and evaluation of School Feeding Programmes promotes accountability and transparency, ensures equitable allocation of resources, improves programme effectiveness and related policies (Aurino et al., 2019; Gelli et al., 2019). Programme planners and implementing agencies make informed decisions on costs and expenditure.

However, programme monitoring and evaluation in developing countries has experienced its fair share of challenges. These include limited resources, lack of infrastructure, limited stakeholder engagement, poor data collection and analysis skills, logistical challenges, dependence on external support and lack of monitoring and evaluation skills in government institutions (Gelli et al., 2019; World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). Cases of limited programme monitoring and evaluation in education have been cited in several countries in the Global South. This is due to several factors that include conflict and instability, funding cuts, limited resources, and limited capacity (UNESCO, 2020).

Strategies to improve the School Feeding Programme implementation and monitoring

The nexus between community engagement and the provision of voluntary services such as participation in School Feeding Programmes is wide and varied. The relationship is very much affected by the socio-economic status of the community. At the same time, the responsibility of the state in funding education is limited because of underperforming economies and limited investment in infrastructural development in most developing countries. Expecting full funding of education programmes from government alone remains a pipedream in most developing economies. There is need for a multifaceted and multi-sectorial approach to the provision of food and nutrition in schools in developing countries.

Barnes et al., (2021) argued for the improvement of the implementation of school-based nutrition programmes by capacitating school committees on healthy eating and developing policies and practices that promote school programmes. There is need to incorporate innovative strategies which do not disadvantage the intended beneficiaries. Several strategies that include working with international agencies, integration of education, health and nutrition services packages, partnerships with non-governmental organisations and interventions that ameliorate the effects of climate change on food production must be pursued

METHODOLOGY

The paper used the qualitative research methodology and the case study design to assess the implementation and monitoring of the School Feeding Programme in primary schools in Mberengwa rural district of Zimbabwe. The case study design provided for an in-depth analysis of the School Feeding Programme using different data generating methods, such as interviews and focus group discussions. It also allowed for the study of phenomenon in different contexts. A sample of ninety-seven participants was purposively selected from seven primary schools in the district. The sample comprised seven school heads, seven deputy school heads, seven teachers-in-charge, one District Schools Inspector, five Schools Inspectors and seventy parents or guardians. In-depth interviews were used to generate data from District School Inspectors, Schools Inspectors, school heads, deputy heads, teachers-in-charge. Interviews allowed for probing on the efficacy of the School Feeding Programme policy, its implementation and monitoring in schools. Ten focus group discussions were conducted with parents and guardians to assess their views on the implementation and monitoring of the School Feeding Programme. The data from interviews and focus group discussions was transcribed, coded and categorised to develop themes. Thematic analysis involved identifying and interpreting emerging patterns from the responses. The themes that emerged from the data were: the significance of the programme; funding challenges; climate change realities; implementation fatigue; limited monitoring; and the role of government and the community.

Ethical considerations

Entry to the selected primary schools required permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Data gathering commenced soon after being granted permission to visit the district by the Ministry. All the participants signed consent forms which were explained to them. They were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

Findings of the study

Findings revealed that the selected primary schools were implementing the School Feeding Programme. However, levels of implementation varied from school to school. On monitoring of the School Feeding Programme findings revealed minimum or no direct monitoring of the programme by district, provincial and head office education authorities. The District Schools Inspector and Schools Inspectors noted that all schools were obliged to implement the School Feeding Programme daily during school days, throughout the week, throughout the term and throughout the year as this was a policy requirement. The District Schools Inspector had this to say:

It is government policy that learners get at least one hot meal a day during school learning hours. To support the School Feeding Programme schools are expected to include a school feeding budget during their fees application, embark on productive units that will help augment the School Feeding Programme. All schools must embark on home grown school feeding programmes in support of the School Feeding Programme. Parents are mandated to support the programme in cash or kind and take turns to prepare meals.

The responses by the District Schools Inspector demonstrate various issues about School Feeding Programmes in Mberengwa district. It can be observed that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has a policy on the School Feeding Programme. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy takes note of the role of parents and local communities in the implementation of the programme. The policy also puts demands on parents and guardians on participation and payment of levies. While participation develops programme ownership, exerting demands on parents and guardians may impact negatively on the implementation of

programmes (Chikuni, 2023). While it was mandatory for every school to implement the School Feeding Programme there were no clear mechanisms to ensure compliance and constant food supplies in schools.

As noted by one of the Schools Inspectors:

The School Feeding Programme is one of the critical areas that we monitor as we do our monthly supervision routines in schools. It is mandatory for all schools to implement the programme religiously. We acknowledge that schools have challenges. Several schools implement the programme a few weeks of opening then thereafter they shelve the programme till term end.

As noted by the school inspector, some schools were partially implementing the programme, despite policy directives. There are distinct reasons that have contributed to implementation deficiencies. These included low budgets that failed to cater for the programme, lack of productive units in schools, reliance on school fees which in most cases were not forthcoming, and the general poverty in the area as the district is in region four of the rainfall regions in Zimbabwe. The region receives low rainfall, and agricultural productivity is low. Some of the reasons for termination of the programme as noted by some of the Schools Inspectors were:

Most schools do not have productive units and relied on school fees which were failing to support the programme throughout the year. Termination of the School Feeding Programme can be attributed to the little amount budgeted by most schools for the programme, which may be as little as three to five United States dollars to cover the feeding for the whole term of 12 to 14 weeks.

The views expressed by the District Schools Inspector and Schools Inspectors highlight lack of sustainability in the implementation of feeding programmes. The views concur with findings by Mmari, Momany & Wambiya (2025) who observed that insufficient and irregular parental contributions negatively impacted on the implementation of feeding programmes in schools in Kenya. The socio-economic status of parents and guardians determined the level of implementation in schools.

While it can be acknowledged that one of the main functions of policy is to provide direction to implementing agencies, school heads have limited control over the failure at implementation stage especially when the resources to support implementation are not available. The District Schools Inspector noted that:

To ensure effective and continuous implementation of the programme we do routine schools supervision as a district. During the supervision process we monitor implementation of the programme. School heads know that it is an act of misconduct to fail to perform any duty as instructed.

One of the Schools Inspectors noted that some schools failed to implement School Feeding Programmes due to a variety of factors, most of which were beyond the control of school heads. For example, some programmes ended because of unsustainable demands on parents, lack of supporting infrastructure, failure to establish business units, limited resources, logistical challenges, and inadequate stakeholder engagement (Drake et al., 2017).

The views of school heads concurred with those of the District Schools Inspector and Schools Inspectors. School heads noted the challenges that hampered the implementation of the School Feeding Programme in rural schools. These included challenges of food sourcing, cooking and general meal planning and distribution coordination and lack of support from parents. Some school heads expressed the following sentiments:

School head 1: We support the School Feeding Programme, but poor funding and lack of support affect schools. The programme becomes a burden to us since we end up food sourcing and monitoring the general cooking coordination. At the same time, we must grapple with the demands of the new curriculum.

School head 2: We are facing numerous challenges in trying to implement the programme, starting from the budget, parents do not adequately support the programme. They feel it is an unnecessary burden shouldered on them when they are already struggling with fees payments and other school necessities.

School Head 3: We have no adequate land to initiate projects. The school business unit has not done much.

School Head 4: We try to implement projects every year, but climatic changes have affected us. We hardly get a good harvest after we have invested in farming. This has led to slow termination of the programme in schools.

The responses above provide a summary of the challenges school heads were facing in the implementation of the programme. These include lack of funding, lack of support by parents, lack of productive land for the business units in schools to initiate projects, and the effects of climate change on agriculture. This demonstrates the dichotomy that exists between policy statements and policy implementation. School heads noted how the programme was an extra responsibility at a time when they were struggling with the demands of curriculum reforms.

Teachers-in-charge and deputy school heads appreciated the aims and objectives of the School Feeding Programme. However, several Teachers-in-charge were concerned about the nutritional value of the food the children in the infant schools received. The food for the infant must have a nutritional focus. The food that learners got primarily depended on availability at the expense of nutritional value.

Parents and guardians in the focus group discussions focused on how the programme was affecting them and the role of government in the implementation of the programme. Some of the sentiments that came out of the focus group discussions were:

Parent 1: The government should take the whole responsibility to ensure adequate funding of the programme. We feel the government is shouldering all the responsibilities on us, yet the School Feeding Programme was their brainchild. We are poor.

Parent 2: We cannot support two families with food at the same time, thus the family and school for the School Feeding Programme. We are struggling to provide a hot meal at home. Charging an additional feeding fee on the fees is a burden to us. We are struggling to pay fees and the levy for the School Feeding Programme is an additional burden. We cannot manage as we are struggling to make ends meet.

From the focus group discussion, it could be noted that the School Feeding Programme was placing a burden on parents. The findings concur with Chikuni (2023) who noted that the School Feeding Programme in Bulawayo Central District was making heavy demands on parents on participation and levies, and parents felt strained and overburdened. The essence of the School Feeding Programme is to create a sustainable intervention to fill gaps created by the home environment. Parents felt fatigued by the programme to the extent of suggesting the termination of the school feeding policy. The responsibilities that came along with the demands of the programme include cooking routines, and firewood gathering in addition to paying levies.

When asked about the monitoring of the School Feeding Programme Parent 3 said:

We do not see any close monitoring of the programme. Rarely do we see monitors from the district and province. In cases where they visit schools, they come to assess teachers. They do not talk to parents who are directly involved in the implementation of the School Feeding Programme.

The response suggests that there is limited monitoring of the programme in schools. District Education officials focused more on academic issues at the expense of the feeding programme. The response suggests that parents who are key stakeholders in the implementation matrix are not considered in monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper makes the following conclusions:

- School business units are not functioning in the selected schools. In cases where they were established, they lacked resources to be of any significance.
- Parents supported the School Feeding Programme by:
 - Fetching firewood and water
 - Planning and cooking meals

- Distributing the food
- Paying levies for the School Feeding Programme
- Performing volunteer work
- While parents supported the aims and objectives of the School Feeding Programme, the demands of the programme overwhelmed them. The demands included participation, voluntary work, and payment of levies. Due to pressure of work parents suggested the termination of the school feeding policy. Parents and guardians viewed the School Feeding Programme as the government's responsibility it should execute.
- District Schools Inspectors and Schools Inspectors monitor School Feeding Programmes when they visit schools for supervision. However, the monitoring did not involve important stakeholders such as parents.
- Schools faced challenges of limited funding, poor storage facilities, and irregular parental contributions. Mberengwa district is in rainfall region four which is prone to droughts and food insecurity. It is therefore a paradox that the same poor parents who were failing to provide for their children at home were being asked to provide the same at school.

It can be concluded that while participants valued the role of the School Feeding Programme, challenges of funding, climate changes in the district, implementation fatigue from teachers and parents, limited monitoring, and limited government support have negatively impacted its implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper makes the following recommendations:

Based on the study findings the following are the recommendations

- School business units exist in name only. They should be abolished. Learners must produce their own food through engaging in Agriculture.
- The role of parents must be revisited. They are being overstretched. Parents are already struggling.
- There is need for full funding of the programme by the government in partnership with international agencies.
- There is need for policy mechanisms and support to ensure schools implement the School Feeding Programme throughout the term.
- The problems of poor infrastructure must be addressed through a multi-sectoral approach in the form of tax rebates for companies.

Implications

The findings have the following implications:

- The reliance on parents and local communities is not sustainable since some communities are poor and cannot provide for the programme.
- The programme sounded unpopular with parents and guardians because of the extra responsibilities it exerts on them.
- The policy in its present state is failing to achieve its aims and objectives.
- The aims of the School Feeding Programme of developing health and nutrition in learners, improving attendance and school enrolment may not be accomplished.
- The programme may digress from its nutritional focus because of food shortages.

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