Enhancing the Quality of School Feeding Programmes in Ghana

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Enhancing Quality of Feeding in Educational Institutions in Ghana – Developments and Challenges

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A nation's ability to harness its resources for development is partly based on the quality of human capital available. The cognitive and mental development of undernourished children is known to be deficient or delayed and can adversely affect school performance. If under-nutrition is present in educational institutions and is carried further in life (7-18 years age group) the health of the population is compromised. Proper nutrition is critical for optimal growth, development and the general well-being and academic performance of children. Access to good nutrition either at home or through the educational system can contribute to the elimination of malnutrition and all its associated health and developmental problems. In this regard, efforts to promote health should begin as early in life as possible and the educational institutional settings provide a good opportunity.

In Ghana, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture recognizes that the optimal use of Ghanaian food resources can contribute to addressing some of the challenges in institutional feeding in schools. This report therefore provides a critical review of nutritional status of children and the current state of institutional feeding in Ghana and the challenges faced with the current program.

We recognize that the school environment in general and boarding schools in particular, are keys for the promotion of optimal human development in the youth since they foster an opportunity to teach the youth on healthy eating and promote healthy lifestyles. The present institutional feeding program at this level therefore ensures that the youth are properly fed and are encouraged to balance this with physical activities that promote health.

In addition to the existing School feeding program that covers mainly students in second cycle schools, a National School Feeding Policy that covers preschool, primary and junior secondary schools is being put in place to enhance child nutrition and health. This policy would cover every Ghanaian child whether in private or public schools and is being developed to be a double-edged incentive for "education and health". The evolution of this policy is to be followed by rigorous consultations involving parents, schools authorities, public and private sector institutions.

The current status of institutional feeding

A recent survey conducted across the nation on the current status of the school feeding program in Ghana revealed that all second cycle boarding schools are actively engaged in the school feeding program and provide 3-square meals including breakfast, lunch and dinner to students on a daily basis. However, only about 5% of day schools were noted to be providing one meal mainly drinks and snacks as lunch.
for their students, which happens to be their main lunch for the day. This makes the probable involvement of day schools into the current program necessary. Therefore facilities for the feeding of both categories (boarding and day schools) of students are critical and being looked at in the current policy. To this, there appears to be no clear policy on school feeding with the day schools in Ghana. This is because, their fees are usually fixed after consultations and do not include feeding. We have therefore recommended that the Ghana Education Service (GES) Committee on second cycle school fees should factor the health and nutrition of the students into determining the daily feeding cost to ensure good nutrition and health. As well, the fixing of fees should be linked to the quality and quantity of food served for optimum health and nutrition within both the boarding and day schools.

Presently, there are slight differences in the types of foods served in secondary schools based on school and region or state within the country. The predominance or importance of certain foods for breakfast, lunch and dinner was observed in the survey. However, we recognize that the safety of these foods, their nutritional quality and the convenience associated with their processing and use are important in attaining good institutional feeding.

In the school dinning halls, irrespective of region, important breakfast foods served are: wheat bread, doughnut, rice porridge, wheat porridge, maize grits, roasted maize (Tom Brown) and fermented maize dough porridge (koko) which are basically high carbohydrate based foods, and these are served without milk or any protein food. In contrast to what is served in dinning halls for breakfast, school canteens and private vendors generally serve a limited scope of foods with rice and stew, rice and beans, and plantain and beans featuring prominently, which to some extent provides some level of protein in the diet. However, access to these foods by students is very limited.

Lunch in the school dining halls comprise predominantly meals based on maize, rice, cowpeas (beans), garri (roasted cassava grits), yam and fish. The availability of these commodities at reasonable cost assists the schools to feed the students. In general, the school/private canteens and food vendors serve foods similar to what is found in the dining halls. Most school dining halls however do not serve plantain and beans (red red), whilst the canteens and the private vendors do, which may be partly due to the cost of plantains. Groundnut-based soups/stews predominate in lunch menus of the Northern zone schools. Meat is not served in most schools which limits the protein intake of the students. There is a strong regional distribution of palm nut consumption but the schools in Volta, Upper East and Upper West regions hardly consumed palm nut soups and instead shea fat is mostly used which is deficient in the much needed Vitamin A and E. Fruits and vegetables are also generally missing from the menus.

The profile of meals served for dinner is similar to lunch meals except that there is an increase in yam-based foods and a reduction of beans-based foods in most regions. Fish is an important source of protein for dinner. Some schools consume fish 6 times a week for dinner but no fruits are served.

Currently, the dining hall is the most important location for serving meals to students. Registered food vendors, unregistered food vendors and school canteens follow in importance in that order. The safety and quality of foods is influenced by the conditions and practices at these service points. Therefore, we recognize that facilities
in the school dining hall and these locations, issues on sanitation, food safety and training for staff are important in any strategy to improve the quality of meals.

Different facilities and locations are used for the preparation of meals in schools. These include designated kitchen; open roofed sheds for cooking using firewood, food preparation area and under trees. These locations may have very serious implications for safety and quality of the foods prepared. These include general sanitary requirements (potable water, clean environment, storage facilities for raw materials and cooked foods), infrastructure available and health and nutritional knowledge of the operators.

The survey revealed that sanitation facilities for the most kitchen staff were found to be inadequate and some schools do not have washrooms and changing rooms for the kitchen staff. This makes hygiene and cleanliness of staff handling food in institutional feeding very critical. Functioning equipments and facilities to support the feeding of students include gas stoves, gas ovens, corn mill and freezers. Electrical appliances are hardly used for institutional feeding in secondary schools except in Eastern, Greater Accra and Central regions where 32.1%, 13.3% and 8.3% respectively of the schools reported its use. For most schools LPG and firewood are the most important source of fuel for food preparation. The use of firewood (60-100% of schools) in the regions has implications for the environment.

Water is very important in food processing and institutional feeding and is a critical raw material whose availability, handling and quality can influence the final outcome of an institutional feeding programme. Some schools have multiple sources of water including pipe-borne (74.6% of the schools), "Tanker Service" (18.3%) and boreholes (49.3%) and streams/rivers (2.8%). The use of raw untreated water is being discouraged and the Ministry of Education has been asked to discourage its use. The sources of food ingredients for institutional feeding are mainly the local market, private suppliers, school farm or farm gate. From the local markets food is acquired weekly (74.6%) and daily (16.9%). Supplies from school farms contribute very little to institutional feeding in Ghana.

The Challenges and the way forward

The major challenges on institutional feeding given by the schools were on issues relating to price, availability of food commodities, logistics and non-payment or delayed release of feeding grants by government. Surprisingly none of the schools raised any issues on food safety, nutritional quality and convenience required to deliver safe foods to the students. Presently, a working group has been tasked by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and the Ghana Education Service to strategize and make proposals for achieving improved nutrition and health in educational institutions. In addition, the working group would prepare a menu guide for providing nutritious meals in institutions at all levels in Ghana on a sustainable basis.