

The Impacts and Challenges of the Ghana School Feeding Programme as a Social Protection Tool

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Abstract

In 2005, Ghana adopted the School Feeding Programme as one of the social intervention strategies to ensure that pupils in poor communities have access to education by removing the barriers of hunger. However, only selected schools in poorer communities benefit from such meals which results in a divide of schools that are beneficiaries of the feeding programme and others that are not; this is irrespective of the fact that they are all classified as poor in the community. Using a qualitative research design, this study explored the views of teachers from six beneficiary schools and six non-beneficiary schools, in Sekyere Kumawu District in the Ashanti Region, on whether the School Feeding Programme has met its goals. Themes that emerged from the interview data suggest that the School Feeding Programme has achieved some gains for beneficiary schools but it has also resulted in inequality and injustice within the communities, especially for those pupils that attend non-beneficiary schools. The study recommends that the government should not stretch itself too thin in its implementation of the school feeding programme nationwide, but to instead focus on fewer communities to ensure that in each poor community, all State owned schools are beneficiaries or encourage civil societies and charities to complement its efforts in providing in-school meals.

Keywords: School Feeding Programme, Ghana, social transfer, poverty reduction, children.

Introduction

The School Feeding Programme (SFP) has been identified as one of the most significant social intervention programmes to ensure access to education for all. The burdens of hunger, malnutrition and ill-health on school age children are major constraints in achieving the Education for All policy and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education as identified by the World Food Programme in 2006 (WFP 2006). Also, according to Pollitt et al. (1996), the irregular school attendance of malnourished and unhealthy children is one of the key factors resulting in poor performance; including short-term hunger, which is more common in children who are not fed before going to school. These have an adverse effect on learning as children who are hungry have more difficulty concentrating and performing complex tasks (Grantham-McGregor et al. 1998). The SFP intervention, a social policy strategy to ensure equality for all citizens, can best be described as an example of social transfer under the Social Protection Strategy (SPS). However, in some instances other factors inhibit the quest for equality and rather widen the gap amongst the poor. In Ghana, the SFP was adopted as a means of ensuring that the poor will have access to education by eradicating hunger for pupils in identified poor districts and communities. Yet, not all children in the identified communities benefit from the SFP due to the programmers' lack of universal coverage of deprived schools. This paper discusses findings from a qualitative study conducted in Sekyere Kumawu District, which is one of the most deprived districts in Ghana that benefits from the SFP, to examine whether the School Feeding Programme has met its goals of ensuring high enrolment and retention of pupils.

Social Protection in Ghana

Ghana's developmental agenda has always included aspects to improve the standard of living of its populace but these good intentions have been hampered by political instability among others (Aryeetey and Goldstein 2000). However, for the past 23 years, the country has enjoyed political stability with the reintroduction of democracy. Since the mid-nineties, Ghana has made steady progress in reducing poverty by more than 50% through the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy

(GPRS) I (2003- 2005) had particular social interventions for the vulnerable and the socially excluded. The Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) II (2006 – 2009) built on the gains of GPRS I, which focused on the growth and achieving of middle income status. The Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda GSGDA (2010 - 2013) also aimed at accelerating the growth of the economy and in raising the living standards of Ghanaians.

These strategies have had significant achievements; the overall percentage of the Ghanaian population defined as poor declined from almost 51.7% in 1992 to 24.2% in 2013 as a result of the positive economic performance. However, an estimated 8.4% of Ghanaians are considered to remain in extreme poverty (Ghana Statistical Service 2014). In 2006, the geographical disparity of poverty indicated that five out of ten regions in Ghana had more than 40% of their population living in poverty and the worst affected being the three northern regions, the Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions, where the poverty rate stood at roughly 60%, well over double that of the South (Ghana Statistical Service 2007). Poverty decreased by about 17% in urban areas and by 24% in rural areas, although no statistics exist on how many people in the country have been weaned out of poverty and how many still remain below the poverty line (Ghana Statistical Service 2014). The growth and poverty reduction rates are one of the best achieved in all of sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP and NDPC 2010; SOS-Ghana 2015) . Yet some vulnerable groups of the Ghanaian society have seen their poverty increase rather than decrease, especially for women and food crop farmers; also food crop farmers actually represent the group with the highest incidence of poverty at 59% (UNDP and NDPC 2010). As a result, several social intervention programmes, including the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty, Capitation Grant and School Feeding Programme, have been implemented with the aim of alleviating poverty among the vulnerable population (Abebrese 2011).

Types of School Meals

In general, school feeding programmes come in one of two basic types, which are “school meals”, and “take-home rations”. School meals mostly referred to as on-site school meals or snacks is a feeding programme whereby the children are fed in school and it is generally

used to support access to education and enhance learning by reducing short-term hunger; and in the case of fortified foods by improving the nutritional status of children. Primarily, it seeks to address short-term hunger by providing meals or snacks during each school day to allow pupils to perform better and make them less likely to drop out from school. Historically, on-site meals have been the most popular modality of school feeding interventions with four main options: breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, and dinner (only for boarding schools.) The timing and nature of the meal depends on the length of the school day, the local customs, availability of trained cooks and a kitchen, clean water and many other factors (Gelli 2010).

Take-Home Rations (THR) is a service whereby families are given food to compensate for their children's attendance if they attend school for a number of days. The THR's main objectives, implemented in 1999, are to enhance girls' school enrolment and retention, and to reduce dropout rates in primary schools (Edstrom 2008). It is conditional to attendance and generally used to provide the motivation to support access to education. THRs are intended to address the consumption needs of the pupil's entire family while developing the human capital of children as well by transferring food to the family conditionally upon school enrolment and attendance, primarily through the income transfer effect. This transfer is an entitlement that enables poor families to release children from household obligations so that they can go to school to gain access to food that can be used to feed other family members, or to sell the food for cash to buy other needed goods (Gelli 2010).

School meals in Ghana

In Ghana the issue of school feeding is not different from other parts of the world. According to the Ghana Living Standard Survey (GLSS) 2000 report, the three northern regions of Ghana namely, Northern, Upper East and Upper West have the lowest school enrolment (Gross Enrolment Ratio of 65%) in 1998 and attendance rates of pupils of school going age in the country with poor completion rates for the few who get enrolled (Ghana Statistical Service 2003). Also within these three regions, the possibility that a child enrolled will complete primary school is barely 50% compared to a national average of over 74% due

to chronic poverty (Ghana Statistical Service 2003). Therefore, the Catholic Relief Services has since 1997, through USAID PL480 Title II resources, targeted these regions in a quest to increase enrolment and attendance especially for girls, sensitize rural communities and build their capacities to support their schools and assist communities to provide accommodation for schools without shelter through school feeding programmes (Development Alternatives International 2001). The feeding program benefits children in the primary schools as well as those in kindergarten. Each child in a programme school is entitled one hot lunch per school day and the girls who are able to make a monthly attendance of 85% or more are given a THR. Additionally, the mothers of girls' have a role to play by ensuring regular and punctual attendance of their daughters and to go to the school to collect the ration when their daughters qualify. Thus, school meals have been used to enrol and retain school children in these regions.

The Ghana School Feeding Program

The Government of Ghana initiated the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in 2005, in collaboration with the Dutch Government. The Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Pillar 3 of the New Partnership inspired the programme for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the recommendations of the UN Millennium Task Force on Hunger. Its long-term goal is to contribute in reducing poverty and enhancing food security in Ghana. Its objectives include the boosting of domestic food production; increasing school enrolment, attendance and retention among kindergarten and primary school children, and reducing hunger and malnutrition, thus contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The Government's strategy to achieve its objective of increasing school enrolment, attendance and retention among kindergarten and primary school children is to provide meals daily, on school days, to children in these State run schools (SEND 2010).

The SFP began on a pilot scheme with 10 schools, drawn from each region of the country. It was expanded to 200 schools covering 69,000 pupils in all 138 districts in 2006 and further

to 598 schools with a total population of 234,800 pupils in that same year. As of December 2013, the SFP covered 3,500 beneficiary schools representing 1,040,000 pupils, thus covering just 22% of all primary and kindergarten pupils across the country. Nevertheless, the coverage is not holistic in deprived areas as some schools do not benefit from the school-feeding programme.

Study area and methods

Ghana can best be described as a youthful country; it has an estimated population of 24.4 million of which 45% is below the age of 18 years (Ghana Statistical Service 2014). This study was conducted in Sekyere Kumawu District in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The Sekyere Kumawu District, with Kumawu as its district capital, has 106 communities and hamlets; it is one of the most deprived districts in Ghana. The entire educational district of Sekyere Kumawu is divided into five circuits with Kumawu Circuit having the highest number of schools.

The study focused on State owned kindergarten and primary schools with specific attention on the beneficiary schools of the school feeding programme and the non-beneficiary schools of the feeding programme. The study selected participants from six beneficiary schools and another from six non-beneficiary schools from all the five circuits. The eligibility criterion for participation of research participants was that each individual should have been a teacher for more than two years in the district.

Twenty teachers participated in the study, comprised of 11 females and nine males. The ages ranged between 21 – 50 years, with the majority of teachers within the age group of 31-35; only one teacher was within the age group of 46-50. All the research participants interviewed were trained teachers.

Each of the 20 teachers participated in a 30-minute in-depth interview held at their convenience, with the majority during their lunch breaks. The teachers responded to questions in relation to the SFP, pupils' enrolment and retention. All the interviews were

audio recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was the method used to identify emerging themes from the interview data.

Findings

The interview data revealed that the responses from the teachers in the study varied according to whether the school benefitted from SFP or not.

Type of school meals

Participants were asked which type of school meals they would prefer for the pupils. Almost all of the teachers mentioned the “On-Site Meals” should be used with breakfast as the preferred option. One teacher commented;

‘I think the pupils having breakfast here in the school will be the best option because we’ll all be assured that they have actually eaten’. P4

The response by the research participants concerning the type and option of feeding programme was well informed as according to the World Food Programme, providing school meals, especially breakfasts, can play a critical role in ensuring that children can learn (WFP 2001). Also, having the pupils eat whilst on the school premise was deemed appropriate by the teachers because then they could monitor their food intake and avoid instances where parents might fail to provide them with meals.

Benefits of School Feeding Programme

The goals of SFP included the retention and improved academic performance of pupils in Sekyere Kumawu. This study revealed that pupils in Sekyere Kumawu who attended schools that benefitted from the SFP exhibited such changes. One teacher remarked:

'Since the inception of the programme we've had fewer dropout rates' P11

There were also views, which suggested that the academic performance of students was improving, as one teacher stated;

'Pupils are more attentive in class, they show more comprehension of subject taught' P16

This finding is in line with the GSFP (2015) report that the introduction of the SFP in deprived schools is achieving the aim of ensuring that children in deprived and poor communities enrolment and retention rates are improved. Also, research participants were asked to share their views on whether the SFP programme should be introduced in all State run schools in the District. All the 20 participants said that the school-feeding programme must be extended to the non-beneficiary schools. The participants argued that it increases enrolment and academic performance, reduce hunger, allow pupils to learn and ensure that all children enrol and complete their basic education. This is indicative of the success stories of schools that are benefitting from the scheme, but in the same community other children are not lucky, thus the SFP needs to be expanded to cover all State schools in the district.

'Inequality' and 'Injustice' as possible outcomes

The interview data also revealed that within the district some teachers had the view that the SFP resulted in inequality. The findings indicated that there was an increase in retention rates among pupils of the beneficiary schools, which was contrary to what pertained in the non-beneficiary schools. Further, the interview data revealed that pupils in the beneficiary schools stayed in school till closing, they were able to progress through the stages of primary education with a completion rate of 30% higher than the non-beneficiary schools, and the incidence of dropout among the beneficiary schools was also very low. On the other hand, findings from the study showed that pupils in the non-beneficiary schools were characterised by truancy, low completion (more than half of the pupils in primary schools failed to complete) and high incidence of dropouts which the teachers stated were as a result of hunger and poverty. When research participants were asked of the retention level of pupils, all the teachers in the beneficiary schools mentioned that retention rates have

improved. On the other hand teachers in non-beneficiary schools had the opinion that the pupils in their respective schools are disadvantaged because they do not benefit from the in-school meals. One teacher from a non-beneficiary school remarked;

'We are losing some of our pupils to the beneficiary schools as in those schools the meals motivated children to attend classes on daily basis'. P2

Another also stated:

'In the same community providing meals for one group and leaving the other produces different classes of pupils' P6

The SFP was adopted as an intervention strategy to reduce the inequality gap between the rich and the poor in relation to access to education. However, from this study it appears that it could also be creating another inequality gap between the poor.

'Injustice'

A number of the teachers, from both beneficiary and non-beneficiary schools, also held the opinion that the SFP creates injustice in the district; a statement from one teacher from a non-beneficiary school sums their comments:

'There is some form of injustice. Aren't all pupils here entitled to the government purse? Why are some poor benefitting and others are not?' P4

The reason for this trend as obtained from the study was that pupils left the non-beneficiary schools to the beneficiary schools in order to benefit from the school feeding programme; a situation, which was confirmed by all the participants from non-beneficiary schools who said that there was a decrease in the enrolment rates in such schools. Therefore, the situation is an attestation to the fact that the social intervention of a feeding programme in one school (beneficiary) has adverse enrolment effect on the other school (non-beneficiary) when implemented within the same community.

Discussion

Social protection as a safety net in the district studied appears to be for those who are lucky to be in a selected school. This should not be the case, vulnerability has to be tackled holistically amongst the poor, as addressing one disadvantaged group's circumstances and abandoning another's rather increases the vulnerability of the entire group. For instance, the probability of those not benefiting from the school feeding programme and proceeding to drop out of school is much higher than those in beneficiary schools but as they live in the same community they might influence their peers to follow suit.

Also, this study reveals that the increase in retention of pupils in State run schools in Sekyere Kumawu District benefitting from SFP could be the reason why the non-beneficiary schools are losing their students. Hence, to avoid social injustice in communities where there is deprivation, programme implementers must include all the State run schools and not be selective, as using the successes of beneficiary schools hides the challenges of those who are not benefitting in the same community. The findings also suggest that the SFP has been stretched too thin in the district studied. Hence, it will be more effective for programme implementers to select fewer districts to ensure all State run schools benefit from the SFP in each respective selected district. This then might ensure total retention rates for all the schools in the selected districts.

However, it is obvious that the government's inability to expand the programme to all schools in deprived communities is as a result of inadequate funding to meet the operational cost. Yet social protection is not the sole responsibility of government, as civil societies and charities are also partners in ensuring that no child is disadvantaged due to poverty. Therefore, the government should encourage other charities and civil society groups at the district level to provide in-school meals in the non-beneficiary but eligible schools in the deprived communities. Prior to the government funded SFP, other agencies were providing in-school meals, and these initiatives should be encouraged nationwide in all deprived communities where NGO's, churches, traditional groups and philanthropists among others complement government's efforts to provide every school going child in-school meals.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are indicative that the beneficiary schools of the SFP have different perceptions from teachers in schools that were not benefitting. The main goal of the SFP is to bridge the inequality gap; however it is possible that in poor communities, the programme design is rather creating another inequality gap between the poor. Thus, the social transfer intervention for reducing poverty if not applied holistically might render it ineffective in eradicating inequality in Ghana. Therefore, to ensure that the poverty needs are being addressed in Ghana, the social interventions must be extended to the whole community. The strategy for implementing the SFP therefore needs to be changed. All State run schools in selected deprived communities have to benefit from the SFP, instead of the government sparsely spreading the programme around the country; civil societies and charities must be encouraged to complement government efforts in order for the children to succeed.

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The Impacts and Challenges of the Ghana School Feeding Programme as a Social Protection Tool

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