



Review

Catalyzing Ghana's School Feeding programme as a world Class Model

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INTRODUCTION

A recent Cochrane review found that school feeding programmes significantly improved the growth and cognitive performance of disadvantaged children. Greenhalgh et al. (2007) in their research that reviewed school feeding programmes in disadvantaged children, which included trials from five continents and spanned eight decades, they posited that feeding programmes' work is not enough for policymakers to decide on the type of intervention that should be implemented. Greenhalgh et al. (2007) therefore, looked at the trials more closely to determine the aspects that determined success and failure in various situations.

Greenhalgh et al. (2007) analysed 18 studies and reported 28 articles using the methods of a realist review. Realist review exposes and articulates the mechanisms by which the primary studies assumed the interventions to work (either explicitly or implicitly); gathers evidence from primary sources about the process of implementing the intervention; and evaluates that evidence so as to judge the integrity with which each theory was actually tested and (where relevant) adjudicate between different theories.

Greenhalgh et al. (2007) considered relevant data, first on a trial-by-trial basis in terms of the interaction between context, mechanism, and outcome, and then across the different trials to detect patterns and idiosyncrasies. Greenhalgh et al. (2007) identified four broad areas relevant to this analysis:

- i) The historical context of school feeding programmes.
- ii) Theories to explain the success of particular programmes.
- iii) Theories to explain their failure or qualify a partial success.
- iv) Measurement issues.

THEORIES ON WHY SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES WORK

The following have been researched, tried and tested to conclude on why school feeding programmes work:

i) Long term correction of nutritional deficiencies: In nine trials conducted by Greenhalgh et al. (2007) their samples were based on a theory that school feeding corrected overt nutritional deficiencies, which in turn improved brain growth and performance. The researchers emphasised that, such trials assumed that food supplements should be rich in energy, protein, and vitamins and continued for a substantial period before their effect can be shown. Under this theory, Greenhalgh et al. (2007) concluded that long term nutritional supplementation generally affected growth (and sometimes performance) when the children were genuinely undernourished, but not when they were not.

ii) Short term hunger relief: Greenhalgh et al. (2007) conducted two trials in low and middle income countries, and three in high income countries. These research trials were built around the theory that "school feeding leads to short term rises in blood (and hence brain) glucose levels, which counteracts the negative effect of hunger on concentration, memory, motivation, and other psychological prerequisites for learning.". The researchers found out that, overall, the effect of interventions built on a hunger relief theory was not constant across different areas of performance (verbal, non-verbal, mathematical) or across studies.

iii) Children feel valued and looked after: Powell et al (1998) criticised studies that failed to control for the effect of benevolent attention and recommended that, at the very least, the control group should receive a low energy drink or piece of fruit along with teacher or researcher attention. Bro et al. (1996) conducted two studies of “at risk” teenagers (school drop-outs, drug users, teenage parents, or from families with other social problems) who, though not malnourished, rarely ate before school. Their findings showed that a generous breakfast cooked in a practical class before the lesson began improved attention to set tasks. Qualitative process data suggested that a meal at school could be a social event that engaged, motivated, and stimulated the students

iv) Reduced absenteeism: Of the studies that measured attendance objectively, most of those in low- and middle-income countries showed significantly higher attendance levels in supplemented groups, whereas studies in high income countries had non-significant effects on attendance.

v) Improved School Diet Inspires improved home diet: In one study, when children were given breakfast at school, their families subsequently bought more milk, meat, fish, and high vitamin C foods, whereas the families of a control group did not change their buying habits. This study done in Canada at a time of rapid social change and rising affluence in addition to two other studies in low- and middle-income countries (where parents presumably had less choice in what they bought) found no changes in home eating patterns.

THEORIES ON WHY SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES DO NOT WORK

Greenhalgh et al. (2007) observed and posited that the commonest reason for failure was that the programme was built around a misguided theory (such as correcting a nutritional deficiency that did not exist) but other reasons may also apply.

i) Food offered is not consumed or provides too little of the missing nutrient: In their research, Greenhalgh et al. (2007) posited that studies that piloted different supplements until they identified one that was readily consumed or that let children choose from a menu were, in general, more likely to improve growth. They opined that, very poor children rarely rejected food in any form, and in these studies the supplement generally had a significant effect. Greenhalgh et al. (2007) observed that, in contrast, those trials with adequate nutrients but less impact on growth generally documented incomplete consumption, sometimes because the children did not attend the meal. Greenhalgh et al. (2007) posited that, in one pilot study, 25% of children rejected cows' milk supplement even when it was chocolate flavoured, strongly suggesting lactose intolerance. Use of a specially formulated low lactose milk supplement refined in response to the children's feedback on its palatability had a significant effect on growth.

Most trials in this review provided at least 15% of the recommended daily allowance of energy to the intervention group. Two studies that provided considerably less than 15% of the recommended daily allowance had no significant effect on weight. However, a study targeting calcium deficiency in teenage girls, which provided less than 15% of the recommended energy levels, did show a positive effect on the primary end point of height gain, suggesting that targeted correction of micronutrient deficiency may be effective.

ii) Low bioavailability: Low bioavailability was occasionally invoked as an explanation for lower-than-expected effect of a feeding programme. Grillenberger et al. (2003) for example, proposed that the milk supplement might have decreased the absorption of iron and zinc

THE CATALYTIC WORLD-CLASS MODEL CASE OF GHANA

The Government of Ghana has dedicated itself to improving the health and education of children and the income of local farmers. The instrument for this purpose and opportunity is the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP). Beginning in the year 2005 as a pilot project, the GSFP set to work administering and implementing nation-wide social intervention and development. The special character of this large and fast growing and impressive programme is making a meaningful contribution to society while setting forth the GSFP as a model of excellence in Africa. Perhaps, the majority of Ghanaians have not taken much notice of the magnitude and demonstrable achievements of the GSFP, except some challenges of the GSFP, occasionally, brought to awareness by the media, as in the recent case of the sacking of the GSFP boss, and alleged corruption in the administration of the programme, or late payment of funds to caterers, or some such other negative stories. However, these facts should not completely obscure the GSFP's very real achievements, whatsoever. The GSFP ideas and ideals are indeed powerful. The GSFP's three immediate objectives are threefold:

- i) To reduce hunger and malnutrition.
- ii) To increase school enrolment.
- iii) To boost domestic food production.

These three objectives pervade policy thinking and set the parameters for much of the decision-making on the operations of the GSFP. They are also in tandem with the some of the academic theories and findings of researchers such as Greenhalgh et al. (2007). The Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and Environment is the core of all inter-governmental co-operation and relations and has oversight responsibility of the whole programme.

Research and literature review, and field work commissioned from the Government of Ghana and international donors agree that while the GSFP addresses the first two objectives, there are

certain other considerations that need to be made in order to achieve the third objective. For instance, in a study of the GSFP undertaken in 2011, by University of California, Berkeley, Haas School of Business, and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), on behalf of Partnership for Child Development, a research and technical assistance group, based at Imperial College, London, the study notes that:

“In certain countries, there is existing infrastructure that can be used to provide the linkage between farmers and the school feeding programme. For example, Food Corporation existed [in India] and was functioning years before nation-wide mid-day meals were introduced. However, in most other countries, such infrastructure may not exist. This aspect may not necessarily be under the purview of the [School Feeding Programme] (SFP) but is still an extremely important pre-condition to the success of the SFP achieving its target.”

The theory, the UCL-GIMPA study notes, is that “by creating a fixed, constant demand that farmers can depend on, agricultural output is pushed to a level above sustenance farming, leading to a spiralling virtuous cycle.” Further, the study, however, feels that in setting up the GSFP, the programme needs to assume that this supply chain is broken, and therefore, will require investment to set up the linkage between farmers and the GSFP. I absolutely agree with this point. Fortunately, Ghana already has all systems that are already working, and the third objective of the GSFP can be achieved based on the existing systems. What needs to be done is consolidating Government of Ghana’s policy on agriculture and leveraging support from relevant institutions and smoothening out cooperation among these institutions and building trust. For example, building bridges between the Buffer Stock Company, Block farming project, local government structures, caterers and the GSFP.

Farmers are indeed supposed to be a core part of the GSFP, and their participation in the programme, can be facilitated. The GSFP effectively addresses the creation of demand and its proper serving, but attention to the creation of supply by farmers and their linkage to the programme, which is rather loose, can be tightened. It would appear there are no firmly established procurement models or procedures for caterers that facilitate purchases from farmers.

For example, the GSFP provides only a guideline for food procurement, which is “80% of food must be procured from locally-grown (Home-Grown) commodities produced by local farmers.” It appears to me that the designers of the GSFP recognise the link between farmers and caterers, but also recognise the difficulty to bring the two players together, and so leaves this aspect of the programme hanging.

Since these challenges have been identified I support the need to redesign a new model to link farmers to caterers in the programme. In the context of the District Implementing Committees (DICs) and School Implementing Committees (SICs), the main challenges negating a sustainable linkage

between local farmers and the GSFP are connecting caterers and farmers, building trust among them, and ensuring community and farmer awareness and ownership. Given the responsibility of overseeing the implementation and management of all components of the GSFP, the DIC has a vital role to play in linking the small farmer to the caterer. Fortunately, there are already examples to show that in a few areas, the linkage between farmers and caterers are working.

Farmer-based organizations already exist in the districts, and the government intervention with block farming concept under the Youth in Agriculture policy can further enhance the organization of farmers. The District Director of Agriculture must be seen as a critical facilitator in linking agriculture to the school feeding programme.

The need for well-documented criteria on the quality and quantity of food to be served to children is imperative as theorised by Greenhalgh et al. (2007). It is acknowledged that many of the SICs from the schools are committed members who check on the food served to the pupils on daily basis. However, what is not known is ‘how the quality of the food is ascertained and how much is the standard quantity that must be given to the school children. This point was also mentioned in the finding of researchers like Bro et al. (1996) and Powell et al. (1998). One wonders if farmers are allowed to use pesticides, weedicides, etc., and whether the GSFP has considered how this is going to affect the children’s health. The GSFP must place particular emphasis on rigorous quality assurance. The GSFP must not miss out on this important point. Deficiencies that would affect the health of the school children must be prevented.

The GSFP must ensure that it does not drain away the success of the programme. Any frivolity with a project of this magnitude could destroy confidence. This could be a signal failure. Food hygiene practice must be taken seriously. The integrity and wholesomeness of the food served to pupils must not be overlooked.

Field study investigating hygiene practices of school-going children and the hygiene conditions under which food is served are generally fair. But there few cases of school children who do not practice good hand washing. Also the use of communal bowls for hand washing could be a sure way for faecal contaminants, especially at places where outdoor latrines do not have associated hand washing facilities. The GSFP must attend to these cases.

Both DICs and SICs are faced with the challenge of budgetary and logistical constraints that indirectly pose some threat to the sustainability of the GSFP. It is intriguing to learn that these committees do not run on any budget from the National School Feeding Secretariat (NSFS), and the lack of funds sometimes hampers effectiveness, especially in the area of monitoring, as this entails regular visit to the schools. In addition, all the challenges faced by these committees in linking farmers to caterers for a sustainable SFP, both DICs and SICs ‘remain an integral part of any successful model due to the variety of services they provide for the programme.’

The GSFP National Secretariat has been much concerned to

keep costs down to prevent ‘cost-push’ inflation, touched off by unrealistic increases in pricing. This is understandable. I share the recommendation that a database of prices of each ingredient by region must be entered and kept updated in order to calculate costs specific to the region where the school is located and to make comparisons of costs of menu across regions.

Costing and wages

I pursue the emphasis that the costing exercise indicates that the cost of ingredients is higher than 40 pesewas for all menus using any price source. Clearly, there are possible explanations for this ‘due to the desirability of the caterer position.’

The costing of meals and other expenses, including staff wages of the caterers must receive much hard thought on both sides, the caterers and their staff and the GSFP so that the caterers would not resort to cutting corners to lower the quality and reduce the quantity of the school meals in order to break even. The caterers have frequently complained about low wages. Thus, the caterers who prepare meals for about 400 students with a staff of about six are forced to pay each staff GHS30 a month. Yet, despite delayed payment, running into several weeks, the caterers have borne the brunt of the costs with equanimity. This miscarriage must not set the tone for the National School Feeding Secretariat relations with the caterers.

PILLARS FOR A NEW MODEL

The UCL-GIMPA field study identifies some critical pillars in the design of a new model for the GSFP. These pillars are worthy of consideration. I particularly affirm the following for optimal effectiveness.

- Organizing farmers to effectively participate in the GSFP.
- Creating a structure to bring farmers and caterers for a roundtable discussion to ventilate issues and share ideas.
- Building trust between caterers and farmers through the vehicle of district assembly to build trust.
- Defining ground rules for negotiation and dispute resolution.

Funding for GSFP

Significant financial and operational resources are being committed to the Ghana School Feeding Programme. Therefore, it is critical to understand the funding requirements. According to the GSFP 2011 Annual Operating Plan, the annual fund requirement was approximately GHS69 million. It is assumed that this required amount was based on the GSFP’s targets covering 2,710 schools and 1,040,000 pupils in 2011.

Now if the programme continues to operate in its current form, it will require the same amount. But we know that there has been considerable increase in the amount. However, the

most updated 2011 budget figure was GHS84 million. Purchases for the programme were up to €40 million. However, at the end of 2010, the Dutch government, one of the key sponsors had not yet invested approximately half of the €40M because of delays in implementation. From snippets of conversation it is highly possible that the Dutch government would not renew its commitment. Although the GSFP funding plan in 2011 includes GHS11.7M funding from the Dutch Government, it is critical for the GSFP to find alternative funding sources without expecting the Dutch government to maintain or expand the programme.

Future funding sources

The GSFP should find future funding sources. The government of Ghana has been and will be the primary source of the GSFP. It is critical to secure long-term funding for the programme while seeking other potential funding sources. The government’s continued, demonstrable strong commitment is particularly encouraging, particularly in instances where other partners, such as the Dutch government or the World Food Programme (WFP), is phasing out of, or handing over, operations in the country.

Ghana can draw inspiration from Botswana, Brazil, El Salvador, Jamaica, and Namibia, where strong government commitment has been the key success factor in whether the programmes continue after other partners have phased out of the country. Much of the evidence from the literature shows that, even faced with a serious lack of resources, strong government commitment has been the difference between failure and success. El Salvador is clear evidence, where political support and collaboration from senior staff, led to using non-traditional funds to continue the programme after the WFP’s exit.

Three other potential funding sources are viable.

NGO Support

The GSFP has secured a strong mobilizing support for the school feeding program from the NGO community. Though direct financial support is unlikely, as perceptively noted, in the UCL-GIMPA report, GSFP should be able to mobilize operational support from the NGOs. Again, this support, could allow the GSFP to transfer costs by outsourcing some of the work currently being done within the GSFP Secretariat office. To appropriately structure these arrangements, it is important that the NGO is both committed and competent in its operational area.

Private/Foreign government donations

Parallel to the grants from the Netherlands, there are other private donors and governments that the GSFP can approach for funding for the school feeding programme. It is also worthwhile seeking out private partners who are interested in supporting the GSFP as a means of demonstrating their

corporate social responsibility investments, and who share the same strategic objectives and priorities of the GSFP.

Companies who want to enter the lucrative business-to-government (B2G) sector would do well to consider increasing their CSR activities, especially those geared to institutional stakeholders. For example part of the criterion would be: What has your company done for the environment lately? The answer can make the difference between capturing or losing that million-dollar government contract. This can be designed both as a spur to investment and as a signal of favourable intent to the business community to help with the funding of the GSFP.

The Government could use the idea of a tax credit for corporate organizations to provide incentives for funding the GSFP.

School children payment for meals

Although the current structure of the school feeding programme provides school children free meals, it is not a good idea to ask the children to pay for a portion of their lunch, as suggested by the UCL-GIMPA report. This might raise fears that the government is going into the business of raising money from children and parents to support the GSFP. The UCL-GIMPA suggestion is theoretically desirable but must be tempered by what is politically feasible. Still, this is a programme of welfare and must be treated as such. The school feeding programme has brought relief to precisely the groups deemed on the outer fringes of society. It is not everything that we must count. The government should also consider a legislation to legitimize the GSFP to ensure its success.

CONCLUSION

The article has made it clear that legislative legitimization of the GSFP is paramount to the eventual success of the Ghana School Feeding programme. Most of the practical steps currently taken and being practiced by the Ghana School Feeding Programme are in consonance with theories propounded by some international researchers on the subject matter. It is imperative for the government of Ghana to upkeep its support for the successful operation of this very crucial venture in the supreme interest of Ghana and its future leaders.

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