

School farming makes lunches affordable

School feeding is common in Africa and widely recognised as beneficial for both the physical and mental development of the children. However, mainly due to the sharp increase of food prices, many parents are no longer able to pay for their children's lunches. This is where school farming comes in as a means to lower the cost of producing meals and thus make the schools more resilient against market forces. A report by Dick Foeken, Samuel O. Owuor, and Alice M. Mwangi.



The well-tended crop garden at Baharini Primary School, Nakuru

Credit Dick Foeken

From a survey among 116 primary and secondary schools in Nakuru town (2006), school feeding appeared to be very common: 85 per cent of the schools had some kind of school feeding programme, in most cases consisting of the provision of lunch to pupils. However, in most schools, primary schools in particular, only pupils whose parents were able to pay were eligible for the school's lunch programme.

School farming appeared to be quite common as well, especially crop cultivation: over half (56 per cent) of the schools grew crops, predominantly in the schools' compounds. Plot sizes ranged from 0.1 to about 5 acres - the average being 0.8 acres - on which a variety of crops were cultivated. In about 80 per cent of the schools practicing crop cultivation, the produce was partly or wholly meant for the school's feeding programme.

In a few schools, the production of

common food crops like kale, beans, maize and cabbage was sufficient for the school's lunch programme for a period of two to six months. However, this applied to a minority of the schools only.

The two most frequently mentioned benefits of crop cultivation were that it helps improve the school's feeding programme and that the school saves money that would otherwise be spent on food. These are the two major elements of the Gardens for Life project (see Box). Yet, only six of the 116 respondents had heard about this programme. Two schools appeared to participate in the project, but had actually sold all the produce in 2006 (the donation of computers being the only benefit so far).

Challenges

In an internal memo in 2007, the Municipal Educational Officer of Nakuru urged public primary schools to

find a way to provide all pupils with lunch to avoid a situation in which some pupils go hungry during the lunch break. For most primary schools, this was a difficult and challenging task. And in the intervening two years since the memo was issued, this task has become even more problematic due to the steep and rapid rise in food prices, resulting in an increasing number of parents who are no longer able to afford school lunches for their children. As said, this is where school farming comes in. Yet, a number of fundamental conditions have to be met:

- Sufficient land. Even though the compounds of some schools in Nakuru were indeed (too) small for a crop garden, the data suggested that for most schools the availability of land did not have to be a major constraint to start or expand crop cultivation. The example of Nyandarua Boarding Primary School in Nyahururu (see Box) shows that even a plot as small as an acre can be very rewarding in terms of yield, feeding capacity and money savings.
- Sufficient water. Nakuru has a relatively dry climate, so most schools face problems with watering their crops. Not every school has its own borehole (only four schools in the survey did), but catching rainwater and storing it in tanks - as was practised by 20 schools surveyed - shows that this problem can be solved as well.
- Professional support. The sudden disappearance of a local NGO called SENVINET (which focused on school farming and other environmental issues) created a vacuum in terms of professional assistance. The role of the extension officers from the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) has been marginal, judging by the fact that only two respondents said that their