Ethiopia could feed its 16.2 million schoolchildren, but with much concerted efforts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Ethiopia, a country with an estimated 16.2 million school-age population, little is known about the implementation status, major achievements, challenges, and theoretical effects of school feeding program (SFP) on future impacts (pathways). We conducted a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence using a mixed-methods approach (a qualitative study complemented by a documentary research method) and a rapid review of relevant evidence. We showed that Ethiopia's SFP has the potential to confer nutritional, academic, and additional (unanticipated) benefits to many students and communities. Nonetheless, SFP is wrestling with complex administrative, economic, political, and infrastructure-related challenges that require close attention. It is recommended that policymakers and concerned stakeholders support the formalization of SFP in a well-defined and functioning administrative structure (from national to grassroots levels) with the minimum appropriate resources to harness the vast potential benefits.

Key Messages

- *The nutritional and health status of children is associated with academic performance of children.*
- *Children exposed to poor diets and dietary inadequacies are more likely to develop cognitive deficits, delayed physical growth, neuromotor development, & metabolic complications.*
- *SFP is linked to improved academic performance, nutritional status, and social interactions in Ethiopia.*
- *SFP has also brought several unanticipated benefits to students and the community (e.g., has created over 15,000 new jobs in the year 2023).*
- *However, SFP is wrestling with administrative, economic, infrastructure-related, & other miscellaneous challenges in Ethiopia.*

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design complemented with a documentary research method was conducted to explore key achievements and successes, and to explore the major challenges of the SFP for better and more successful future SFP implementation in Ethiopia. A documentary research method was used to support the data collected via in-depth interviews with selected key informants. A rapid systematic review of relevant evidence was also conducted to analyze the evidence on the effect and/or association of school feeding with academic performance, nutritional status, and food security. A thematic analysis approach was used to synthesize the evidence.

KEY FINDINGS

How does SFP benefiting Ethiopian children?

Though it is too early to unveil all the potential benefits and outcomes, SFP in Ethiopia has been repeatedly reported to have improved the academic performance, nutritional status, and social interactions of schoolchildren. In addition to creating, a better and conducive teaching-learning environment, children enrolled in SFP were seen to have better school enrollment and academic scores, while low dropout rates and absenteeism. Participation in SFP has also been linked to improved nutritional status as reflected in improved weight, BMI, and height for age Z-score (HAZ) index in school children. It has been also strongly reduced hunger in schools. Furthermore, SFP resulted several unanticipated benefits such as heled to the creation of over 15,000 new jobs that particularly benefited women and youth; strengthened student to student and student to teacher interactions; increased community participation in school activities and made school gardening to be a pinpoint of school activities.

Challenges of SFP

Despite the strong benefits that motivate stockholders, SFP is facing complex administrative, economic, infrastructural, and other (miscellaneous) challenges. Most importantly, the lack of a well-recognized and supported structure within the government system has been a major challenge. Furthermore, Inadequate funding, misconceptions and false narratives, poor infrastructure (lack of roads or poorly constructed roads, shortage of transportation facilities, poor school infrastructure), shortage of essential logistics, poor hygiene and sanitation facilities, political and security-related issues, poor integration and collaboration between (and within) sectors, and disparity between regions have all been identified as critical challenges impeding the success of SFP in the country.

What should be done?

Priority should be given to formalizing the SFP by developing a well-defined and functional administrative structure across all levels of administration (from federal to local or kebele) and providing the bare minimum of resources. Furthermore, establishing political commitment and strengthening community ownership are required to harness all the potential benefits and ensuring the and sustainability of SFP in Ethiopia.

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