

SPECIAL REPORT

Thrills, kicks of Nigeria's school feeding programme



Some pupils in one of the Early Child Centre (ECC) classes of Christ the King Primary School, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, enjoy their meal

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Vice President Yemi Osinbajo in 2016 launched the National Home Grown School Feeding Programme aimed at providing children of Primary 1 to 3 free school meals with food procured from local smallholder farmers.

Home-grown school feeding links local agricultural production to food procurement for schools, with direct benefits for smallholder farmers as well as children.

Programme's aim

Backed with technical support from the London Imperial College's Partnership for Child Development (PCD), it is meant to provide school children free locally-sourced meals every school day. It is also designed to improve school enrolment and completion, stimulate agricultural production and create employment opportunities for members of the community.

It commenced at inception in 18 states to provide school meals to an estimated 5.5 million children in public primary schools. The federal government plans to expand the programme to all 36 states, and when fully realised, it aims to feed 24 million children. Apart from the provision of meals to school children, by government's estimation, it creates an end-to-end value chain that includes farmers, traders, aggregators and cooks.

The programme is part of a N500 billion funded Social Investment Programme announced by the Buhari administration to tackle poverty and improve the health and education of children and other vulnerable groups.

Osinbajo said at the launch: "Today, we lay an important building block in securing our future by mapping out the implementation plan to ensure that even the most disadvantaged children are free from malnutrition."

He thereafter presented a strategic plan on how federal, state and local governments

are to synergise on the programme over the next four years, even as the government is working with key partners to capitalize upon global experience.

Success review

The success of the programme was reviewed by key decision makers at a meeting held in Kaduna in late April 2017 which brought representatives of the 18 initial participating state governments, the Office of the Vice President and key technical advisors and backers to review its performance. Later in October 2018, Vice President Osinbajo said in a keynote address at the closing ceremony of the 20th Annual Global Child Nutrition Forum in Tunis, Tunisia that over \$183 million had been invested in the programme.

He said over nine million primary pupils were at that time already benefitting in 26 states. Osinbajo said the programme had been by all accounts, a remarkable success, adding that by the end of 2018, with more states joining, it was set to become the largest school-feeding programme in Africa. He told the audience that the success of the programme in a short time was due to unequivocal political will, transparency and accountability.

Problems emerge

As the programme progressed in more states, certain problems however began to emerge. The Special Adviser to the President on National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) Mrs. Mariam Uwais, disclosed at a media briefing in Abuja that some officials of the programme in Niger and Benue states were suspended for alleged fraudulent practices. She noted that the officials had taken money without the knowledge of government and even opened personal accounts where they had directed that some money for the programme be lodged, adding that they were being investigated by the Economic And Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).

"The National Social Investment Office is ably empowered to suspend the programme in any state where the prescribed standard is reported to have fallen below expectation

until a redesigned realignment is achieved," she said.

Besides that, there were reports in some states that children were being poorly fed, falling short of government's projected standard of providing quality nutritionally balanced meals as fish, bread, eggs, beef or chicken were sparsely served.

In some cases, children were reported to be served food in their palms or polythene bags instead of plates.

Difficulty in processing payments to vendors and suppliers also surfaced in some areas, retarding the programme's spread. Such payment delays resulted in inability of vendors to provide food in some schools, sometimes for a week or more.

Programme excites Osun pupils

Reports by our correspondent in Osun State say despite the hitches, some pupils in government schools in the state hardly want to miss school even if they fall ill because of the daily meals. For a pupil that may be unavoidably absent from school, food vendors and teachers said some parents would come to school with a plate at break time to collect food for the kid.

The pupils know the food roster and could predict the kind of food that would be served from Monday to Friday. The

initiative, according to our corespondent, has practically increased enrolment in public schools across the state.

At the SDA Government Elementary School A&B, Ede, pupils listened attentively to their teacher during the second lesson when our correspondent visited, but the moment a motorcycle brought one of the food vendors to the school, the concentration vanished and the food became the next subject because it was break time. As the food vendor alighted from the bike, the pupils didn't waste time bringing their plates from their lunch bags and the food was served.

One of the pupils, Faruk Husain, didn't know who paid for the food but he knew that he must eat in the school daily. He said: "It is our food. They always bring it for us. We don't pay for it. They would just give us, I like the food. They give us beans and egg and fish sometimes and rice and egusi soup sometimes and they also give us banana and oranges too. I really like it."

Another pupil, Adenike Alamun, said it was Aregbe's food (referring to a former governor of the state, Rauf Aregbesola).

"In our school, they give us Aregbe food every day. The food is good, it is Aregbe that told them to give us", she tried to explain.

Food vendors in the school said they were recruited by the state government during the administration of Governor Aregbesola. Mrs Adesola Babatunde, a vendor, said: "The state government recruited us and we are getting our money, we heard that the federal government is also paying us through the state but we don't have the full details."

Mrs Bolanlewe Alarape, another food vendor, said she was only concerned with getting her money on time.

"They are paying us regularly and we are providing the food. We know the money is coming from both the state and federal government but we don't know how," she said.

The Head Teacher of the school said she was not authorised to speak with journalists, but a teacher said many kids who used to stay at home now come to school regularly since they were sure they would eat.

The teacher added that the feeding manifests in the children's physical looks and behaviour. The Director, State Programme

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Pupils of SDA Government Elementary School A&B, Ede, Osun State