

Coping with Increasing Food Prices in Nakuru, Kenya: Urban school farming as a way to make school lunches affordable

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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.

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

The well-tended crop garden at Baharini Primary School, Nakuru
Photo: Dick Foeken, 2007



The Gardens for Life project

With rising food costs, some schools in Kenya have started to combine their school feeding programme with school farming, i.e. using what they produce in their gardens in the feeding programme. This is mainly happening at schools with enough land to cultivate crops and keep animals. Some initiatives are encouraging the combination of school feeding with school farming, for example the Gardens for Life project run by the Kenya Youth Education and Community Development Programme (the programme is also active in India and the UK). It aims to promote agriculture in primary schools (following its exclusion from the curriculum in 2000) as a way of equipping children with practical skills in farming and to encourage schools to grow crops for school lunches and thus improve pupils' nutritional levels and reduce costs. The farming techniques taught are as far as possible organic and innovative, with new highly nutritional crops being introduced.

The results of a pilot project in 20 public schools in three districts (Nakuru, Laikipia and Nyandarua) have been promising so far. Nyandarua Boarding Primary School (750 pupils) in Nyahururu town saved Ksh. 200,000 (approx.

US\$ 2,800) on lunches in 2004 and had introduced carrots, spinach and courgettes as daily supplements to the usual diet of maize, beans and potatoes. Very few chemicals were used and natural methods were employed instead to control pests and diseases. The one-acre plot was even producing a surplus of vegetables that were being sold to neighbouring communities as "chemical-free" food. Munyaka Secondary in Laikipia District, which is known as a "slum school", has seen a 3 per cent increase in enrolment since the introduction of the Gardens for Life project. The school introduced radishes, garlic, onions and beetroot, all known for their high vitamin content, and the health of the students improved due to the better quality of the meals being offered. Students from poor families that were unable to afford school fees have benefited from the introduction of the work-for-fees programme, whereby students work on the school's plot to raise money to cover their fees and can then stay at school to complete their education.

Source: www.edennet.org and Daily Nation (2005): "Schools in novel farm project" (<http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/printpage.asp?newsid=46980>)

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 schools had received assistance from MoA extension officers in 2005.
- **Leadership.** School farming is usually the responsibility of one teacher, which means that the success of the school's farming activities is not only dependent on factors such as land, water and support, but also on individual qualities like a teacher's organisational skill, enthusiasm, dedication, etc. One of the public primary schools in Nakuru did very well in terms of school farming in 2006, producing kale, cabbage and maize for its lunch programme. However, in the course of 2006 (i.e. after the survey) the teacher in charge of farming activities was transferred to another school. It took some time before another teacher could be found to take over these responsibilities and the garden was noticeably neglected during the first half of 2007.

In summary, school feeding – and in particular the provision of school lunches – is high on the development agenda' (and linked to three of the Millennium Development Goals). In Nakuru, a few schools managed to provide all pupils with a lunch on a daily basis at an affordable price. These schools have been able to reach a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency in their feeding programmes through their school farming activities, thus compensating for the otherwise very

high costs that would be involved if all ingredients had to be bought. These schools, as well as the Gardens for Life project, can serve as good examples for others regarding school farming.

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Note

- 1) See for instance the school feeding programme of the World Food Programme (http://www.wfp.org/food_aid/school_feeding/WFPApproach_INTRO.asp?section=12&sub_section=3) and the US\$ 212m Ghana school feeding programme (Government of Ghana 2006). See also <http://www.sign-schoolfeeding.org/default.aspx?guid=a962aa37-223f-4dd4-9270-318cc907ba73&live=true&print=true>

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