



Feeding for the Future: Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Implementation and Impact of the School Feeding Programme in Rwanda

Vedaste Muneza & Dan Imaniriho
University of Rwanda
Email: mnezvedasj@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study explores the implementation, benefits, challenges, and sustainability of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Rwanda through the perspectives of key stakeholders school leaders, parents, and learners. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from three schools across diverse settings, including urban, rural, and refugee camp contexts. The study employed in-depth interviews with school leaders and parents, and focus group discussions with learners in upper primary levels (P4–P6). Findings reveal five major themes: perceived benefits of the SFP, implementation practices and stakeholder roles, challenges in programme delivery, community participation and ownership, and sustainability with recommendations for improvement. Participants recognized the SFP's positive impact on attendance, concentration, and performance though challenges like unstable funding, weak infrastructure, low community involvement and regional disparities limit its effectiveness. Implementation models varied depending on context, with refugee schools relying heavily on external partners, while public schools engaged parents and local communities. Community participation was identified as both a strength and a challenge, with effective parental involvement enhancing programme ownership, while weak engagement led to inequities in contributions. The study also highlighted the need for continuous capacity building for stakeholders, stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and increased government support to ensure sustainability. This research contributes to a better understanding of the contextual dynamics of the School Feeding Programme in Rwanda and provides evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.*

Keywords: *School Feeding Programme, Rwanda, stakeholder perspectives, implementation challenges, community participation, sustainability, educational equity.*

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I. Introduction

Improving access to quality education is a core development goal in many low- and middle-income countries, and increasing attention is being paid to how students' nutrition affects learning. School feeding programmes (SFPs) have become an effective tool to fight hunger while promoting attendance, focus, and academic performance particularly among vulnerable learners.

In Rwanda, the School Feeding Programme has become central to government strategies for expanding education and addressing food insecurity. Managed by the Ministry of Education and supported by partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the SFP has been strengthened through initiatives like the National School Feeding Policy and Strategic Plan. These aim to ensure daily nutritious meals for all schoolchildren while supporting local agriculture and encouraging community involvement.

Despite these efforts, implementation varies greatly. Factors such as school type, geographic location, and local economic conditions influence success. While some schools benefit from good infrastructure, consistent food supply, and strong parental participation, others—especially in rural or refugee settings struggle with poor facilities, irregular deliveries, and low community engagement.

This study investigates these differences by examining the experiences of school leaders, parents, and students from three schools across Rwanda. It explores perceptions of the programme's benefits and weaknesses, evaluates implementation practices, identifies barriers, and offers recommendations to improve programme effectiveness and sustainability. By highlighting the practical realities on the ground, the research provides insights to strengthen the SFP and support Rwanda's broader education and social protection goals.

2. Literature Review

School feeding programmes (SFPs) are recognized globally as vital interventions for addressing child hunger, improving educational outcomes, and fostering community development. Their multifaceted objectives ranging from promoting school enrolment and attendance to enhancing child nutrition and supporting local economies have drawn attention from governments, development agencies, and researchers alike. This review synthesizes the existing literature on school feeding, focusing on its global rationale, implementation strategies, and contextual effectiveness, before narrowing to the Rwandan experience and the identified gaps that this study seeks to address.

2.1 Global Rationale and Objectives of School Feeding Programmes

Globally, SFPs are widely promoted as instruments to reduce short-term hunger and support educational outcomes in developing contexts. According to the World Food Programme (WFP, 2020), over 388 million children across 161 countries benefit from school meals. The provision of food at school has been linked to improved enrolment, attendance, cognitive development, and classroom concentration (Bundy et al., 2009). In many low-income settings, school meals are often the only reliable meal children receive, playing a crucial role in alleviating food insecurity.

Additionally, school feeding is viewed as a social safety net, helping to offset household food expenditures while enabling parents to send their children to school. Studies in countries such as India, Ghana, and Brazil have shown that structured and well-resourced school feeding initiatives can significantly enhance student retention, particularly among girls and marginalized populations (Drake et al., 2016). SFPs also contribute to community

development through local food procurement, fostering employment opportunities for cooks and suppliers.

2.2 Models of Implementation and Stakeholder Roles

Different countries implement SFPs through diverse models, often shaped by political commitment, available resources, and institutional capacity. The two primary models are the centralized approach (government-led) and the decentralized or community-based model, often involving parental contributions, school committees, and local authorities (FAO, 2013). In sub-Saharan Africa, hybrid models combining government and community input are most common due to funding constraints and infrastructural limitations.

The success of such programmes hinges on effective coordination among multiple stakeholders, including school staff, parents, local government bodies, and external donors. In contexts where community ownership is strong, implementation tends to be more sustainable and responsive to local needs (Gelli et al., 2019). However, inadequate infrastructure, poor planning, and lack of trained personnel often undermine the effectiveness of SFPs.

2.3 Challenges and Constraints in Low-Income Countries

Despite their benefits, SFPs face persistent challenges, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Funding irregularities, inconsistent food supply chains, limited meal diversity, and lack of cooking infrastructure are frequently cited (WFP, 2020). Moreover, the burden placed on parents to contribute food or resources can exacerbate inequalities, especially in economically marginalized communities.

Several studies in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia highlight that SFPs are sometimes perceived as external or donor-driven initiatives, leading to low community buy-in and unsustainable practices once funding ends (Alderman & Bundy, 2012).

This issue underscores the need for effective policy frameworks, long-term financing strategies, and participatory monitoring systems to ensure continuity and effectiveness.

Gendered experiences also influence programme outcomes. Girls often benefit disproportionately from SFPs, as families are more likely to send daughters to school if meals are provided. Nevertheless, the absence of gender-sensitive monitoring and culturally inclusive food options can limit impact.

2.4 The Rwandan Context: Policy and Practice

Rwanda has demonstrated strong political will in advancing school feeding. In 2020, the Government of

Rwanda launched the National School Feeding Policy, aiming to institutionalize the programme across all public and government-aided schools. The policy promotes a decentralized, home-grown school feeding model, whereby parents, communities, and local authorities contribute resources, with government support for coordination, training, and infrastructure development (MINEDUC, 2020).

Early assessments suggest that this model has had a positive impact on student attendance, retention, and concentration, especially in rural and food-insecure areas (World Bank, 2021). However, implementation remains uneven, and disparities persist between rural and urban schools, and between mainstream schools and those in refugee or high-poverty contexts. A key concern is the sustainability of parent-led contributions in areas of high vulnerability, where food insecurity is prevalent, and household resources are limited.

The role of external actors such as WFP remains critical, especially in refugee-hosting districts. In these settings, the programme is often more consistent in food provision but less integrated into national policy frameworks. This dual structure poses challenges for equity, sustainability, and harmonization of standards.

2.5 Gaps in Research and Rationale for the Study

While prior studies in Rwanda have highlighted the positive outcomes of school feeding, there remains a dearth of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in its implementation. Existing evaluations tend to focus on quantitative indicators such as enrolment and nutrition levels, without adequately capturing the perceptions, challenges, and contributions of school leaders, parents, and learners.

Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to the contextual nuances affecting implementation across different types of schools and geographical areas, such as rural-urban divides or refugee settings. Understanding these contextual differences is essential for informing equitable policy interventions and for designing flexible, responsive, and scalable models of implementation.

This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a qualitative approach to examine the multifaceted experiences of stakeholders involved in the SFP across diverse school contexts in Rwanda. It investigates both the perceived benefits and the challenges of the programme while providing concrete suggestions for enhancing its sustainability and inclusiveness.

2.2 Models of Implementation and Stakeholder Roles

The effectiveness of school feeding programmes (SFPs) is closely tied to how they are implemented and the extent to which different stakeholders are engaged in

their design and delivery. Various models of implementation exist across global contexts, shaped by political structures, resource availability, and the socio-economic landscape. While no one-size-fits-all approach guarantees success, several typologies have emerged, each with distinct roles for stakeholders such as governments, schools, parents, local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international development partners.

2.2.1 Centralized Model

In the centralized model, school feeding is predominantly planned, funded, and managed by national governments. Ministries of Education or Social Affairs usually take the lead in budgeting, food procurement, and distribution, with limited roles for local actors. This model tends to be effective in contexts where governments have strong administrative capacities and consistent funding streams. For example, Brazil's national school feeding programme, managed under the National Fund for Educational Development (FNDE), has achieved remarkable success due to state-level planning, guaranteed public funding, and alignment with agricultural policies. Centralized models allow for uniform standards and economies of scale but often suffer from bureaucratic delays and reduced responsiveness to local needs.

2.2.2 Decentralized and Community-Based Models

In contrast, decentralized or community-based models distribute responsibilities among local government entities, school committees, and parents. These models aim to increase ownership, foster local accountability, and align with community preferences. In such systems, schools or community structures often handle food procurement and meal preparation, sometimes relying on parental contributions or in-kind support (e.g., food items, firewood, or labor). This approach is commonly adopted in sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana and Kenya, where community engagement is seen as key to programme sustainability in resource-constrained settings.

The Rwandan School Feeding Programme largely follows a decentralized, home-grown model, where responsibilities are shared between central government institutions and local stakeholders. Parents play a major role in contributing to school meal preparation either financially or in kind while schools are responsible for local implementation. The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) provides policy guidance, technical assistance, and financial subsidies for vulnerable students. This model is underpinned by Rwanda's National School Feeding Policy, which encourages local food procurement to support smallholder farmers and enhance community ownership.

2.2.3 Hybrid Models

Hybrid models combine features of centralized and decentralized systems. In such arrangements, national governments may oversee policy and budget allocations, while operational responsibilities are delegated to regional or district authorities and school management committees. These models allow for the flexibility of local decision-making with the oversight and standardization offered by national coordination. Hybrid models are useful in large or diverse countries where regional disparities exist and centralized implementation may be inefficient or inequitable.

In Rwanda, this hybrid structure is evident in refugee-hosting areas, where international agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) collaborate with the government to implement school feeding in alignment with national guidelines. WFP manages the logistics and provides funding in these settings, particularly where household vulnerability limits the feasibility of parental contributions. While effective in addressing food insecurity, this dual system raises questions of equity and harmonization across the country.

2.2.4 Stakeholder Roles

Successful implementation of school feeding programmes requires clear and coordinated roles for all stakeholders involved. Government institutions are responsible for policy formulation, coordination, and in some cases, financing. Their leadership is crucial for setting quality standards, ensuring budgetary allocations, and integrating school feeding into broader education and nutrition policies.

School leaders and teachers are vital in the day-to-day implementation, including organizing food preparation, monitoring attendance and food consumption, and ensuring that meals contribute to learning goals. Their role as frontline implementers makes them essential for identifying bottlenecks and engaging with parents and students.

Parents, particularly in decentralized models, are frequently expected to contribute labor, food, or financial resources. While this promotes ownership, it can also impose a burden on low-income households and may reduce participation in areas of high poverty unless external subsidies are provided. Parents also serve as informal monitors of food quality and service delivery.

Finally, development partners, NGOs, and civil society organizations often provide technical support, capacity building, and supplementary funding. Their involvement can strengthen implementation, especially in fragile or refugee settings, but must be aligned with national priorities to avoid fragmentation or dependency.

Reflexion on the SFP implementation models

Each implementation model offers unique advantages and limitations, and the success of any approach depends on context-sensitive design and inclusive stakeholder engagement. Rwanda's experience illustrates the potential of hybrid, decentralized models to promote sustainability and community ownership—provided that coordination mechanisms, capacity building, and equity considerations are carefully addressed. Building robust implementation systems with shared responsibilities and adequate support remains key to ensuring that school feeding initiatives deliver long-term educational and nutritional benefits.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), both of which provide a robust lens for analyzing the implementation and impact of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Rwanda.

Ecological Systems Theory posits that a child's development is influenced by multiple interconnected systems, ranging from immediate settings (microsystems) such as family and school, to broader societal and policy environments (macrosystems).

The SFP intersects with several of these layers: the microsystem includes learners' interactions with teachers and meals provided at school; the mesosystem captures the collaboration between schools and parents; while the exosystem and macrosystem include policies and economic conditions shaped by government and international donors. Understanding the SFP through this ecological lens highlights how learner outcomes are shaped by overlapping social, institutional, and policy environments.

Stakeholder Theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of identifying, engaging, and balancing the needs of all individuals and groups affected by an initiative. In the case of SFPs, key stakeholders include learners, parents, school staff, local communities, government institutions, and development partners. This theory guides the analysis of roles, expectations, and interactions among these actors, while also examining how stakeholder collaboration or lack thereof affects programme effectiveness and sustainability.

Together, these frameworks enable a holistic understanding of the SFP as a multi-level, collaborative intervention that impacts and is influenced by diverse actors and systems. They also provide a foundation for exploring community ownership, policy alignment, and equity in access and participation, which are central to the study's research questions and findings.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore Stakeholders Perspectives on the implementation, impact, and sustainability of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Rwanda, specifically in Nyamagabe District.

The study was conducted between March and June 2023 from three schools that were selected from 50 schools of twelve years basic Education Schools which has primary level and the sample of respondents was selected from total population over 6343 (GS Kizi has approximately 1360 population, GS Kigeme has approximately 2968 population and GS Gikongoro has approximately 2018 population). This total population composes learners, teachers and head teachers while total number of parents are not mentioned because some parents have more than one learners.

The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in capturing the lived experiences, views, and contextual realities of diverse stakeholders involved in the programme. A multiple-case study design was used, involving three primary schools drawn from varied geographical and institutional contexts, including rural, urban, and refugee settings. This design enabled the researcher to gain comparative insights and identify both shared and context-specific dynamics affecting the implementation of the SFP.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity and relevance to the study objectives. A total of 45 individuals participated, including school leaders (head teachers, school deputy of studies, and school feeding focal persons), parents, and learners. One school leader from each school and 18 parents were selected from three participating schools, while 12 learners were engaged through three focus group discussions (FGDs) and other participants like school deputy of studies and teachers. Each FGD consisted of eight learners from upper primary grades (P4 to P6), with a balanced representation of gender and school context.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion guides. These tools were designed to explore stakeholder perceptions, roles, challenges, and suggestions for improvement in the SFP. Interviews and discussions were conducted in Kinyarwanda, the local language, and later translated into English for analysis. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in transcription.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved transcribing interviews, coding data, and identifying recurrent themes. An inductive approach was applied to allow patterns to emerge organically from the narratives. Five major themes were generated and structured the presentation of the findings. Ethical

clearance was obtained from the University of Rwanda, and all participants were briefed on the study's purpose and their rights. Informed consent was secured from adult participants, and assent was obtained from learners. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study based on qualitative data gathered from school leaders, parents, and learners in nine Rwandan schools implementing the School Feeding Programme (SFP). The analysis is organized around five central themes that emerged during data interpretation: perceived benefits of the programme, implementation practices and stakeholder roles, challenges encountered, community participation and ownership, and sustainability considerations. The themes are analyzed with reference to relevant literature and theoretical perspectives introduced earlier, particularly Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and stakeholder engagement models.

4.1 Perceived Benefits of the School Feeding Programme

Participants across all stakeholder groups school leaders, parents, and learners consistently recognized the School Feeding Programme (SFP) as having a significant impact on education and nutrition. The most widely reported benefit was improved school attendance. Head teachers and feeding coordinators observed that learners, especially those from food-insecure families, were more likely to attend school regularly when meals were guaranteed. This resulted in reduced absenteeism and tardiness, and learners showed greater energy and engagement in class.

In addition to attendance, school leaders noted improved classroom behavior and participation due to the positive effect of meals on learners' energy levels and concentration. These observations are consistent with broader evidence linking school feeding with enhanced academic performance through the alleviation of hunger-related distractions.

Parents also emphasized the dual advantage of the programme. While it helped meet their children's nutritional needs, it also reduced the financial pressure of feeding them at home. Many parents expressed that their children returned from school more alert and motivated, often stating that the school meal was their most dependable source of food during the day. They further reported fewer hunger-related complaints and a noticeable improvement in their children's focus and enthusiasm for learning.

Learners supported these views, sharing that school meals helped them stay attentive and energized, especially those who had to walk long distances. For many, the meals provided not only nourishment but also a sense of comfort and encouragement to stay in school throughout the day. Some even described the programme as vital to their educational experience and general well-being.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the SFP contributes significantly to improving learner nutrition, enhancing attendance, and supporting academic engagement particularly in economically disadvantaged communities. These benefits underscore the importance of maintaining and expanding the programme to ensure continued support for learners' growth and to reduce inequities rooted in food insecurity.

Table 1: Participant Groups

Participant Group	Key Perceived Benefits	Details / Impact
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved attendance and reduced absenteeism - Enhanced classroom engagement and behavior - Positive academic outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners motivated to attend regularly due to meal availability Better energy levels lead to higher participation and focus Reduced tardiness and distraction from hunger
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced household food burden - Children return home enthusiastic and less fatigued - Improved focus and reduced hunger-related complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School meals relieve families' economic pressure Meal at school often the most reliable daily nutrition Supports consistent school attendance and learning
Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased concentration and reduced fatigue - Feeling of security and comfort from regular meals - Enhanced ability to complete lessons effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Especially beneficial for learners traveling long distances Boosts motivation and overall well-being Sustains energy levels throughout the school day

This table summarizes the common perceived benefits across stakeholders and highlights how each group experiences the positive impact of the School Feeding Programme.

The following discussed themes were identified for perceptions on the implementation and educational impact of the School Feeding Programme

Understanding stakeholders' perceptions is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) within Rwanda's 12 Years Basic Education (12YBE) framework specifically in Nyamagabe District. This section presents the views of key participants parents and learners regarding the implementation, relevance, and educational impact of the programme. It aims to capture not only their satisfaction and perceived benefits but also the challenges and areas needing improvement from their perspectives.

Specifically, the sub-sections that follow address two major objectives: (1) to assess parents' views, roles, and levels of involvement in supporting the School Feeding Programme within the 12YBE framework, and (2) to explore learners' experiences, satisfaction, and perceived benefits of the programme. Through their voices, the analysis reveals how school feeding contributes to student attendance, retention, and concentration, while

also uncovering concerns related to food quantity, quality, and programme sustainability.

The survey responses from head teachers, parents and learners differed little from one another. The lack of water for drinking and sometimes for cooking especially in the summer or during the dry seasons, they are stressed by every head teacher and the parents' uncooperative financial contributions (19,500 Rwandan Francs every trimester for secondary students and 975 for primary students).

Head teachers believe that school feeding increased their workload because for example when a staff member is on duty they have to take care of all logistics such as making sure there is enough water for cooking, maintaining cleanliness, ensuring that all students receive food in all classes and maintaining hygiene in the classroom. These tasks take more time. Thus, parents think that money from donors has been used to establish kitchens and refectories in schools. However, that cash isn't set aside to handle every issue.

According to parents who participated in the survey on how they view and involved in implementing and supporting school feeding programme, all of them have a positive impact on addressing the problem of pupils not finishing their full 12-year basic education.

An overview of the parents' perspectives on this subject and how it has helped to lower student dropout rates may be found in the interviews that follow.

Here is what one parent said during the parent-interview process:*Some of our kids didn't want to attend to school before this program started serving lunch to them in school. They would simply hide in odd jobs close to home centers. Some of them would travel to cities like Huye or Kigali in search of work as homeboys or homegirls, returning home whenever they pleased (Parent R1, Rural School, Interview, May 2023).*

The same views were held by other parents as well. For instance, a woman parent said *"Before the school started giving food, my children used to come home for lunch and would not return in the afternoon. Now they stay the whole day," a parent from a rural primary school in Nyamagabe District (Parent R2, Rural School, Interview, May 2023)*

Some parents disagreed, arguing that there were other factors contributing to the fall in student dropout rates than the food served in schools. They felt that the removal of school fees from all 12 years of basic education in the country contributed to the decline in student absenteeism, in contrast to the past when parents had to pay school fees, which many of them were unable to pay, and when the government did not follow students who dropped out.

For instance, the following was said by another respondent;*These days, parents understand the value of education and that it is what will enable us to escape poverty; even my child is aware of this. My daughter, for instance, used to tell me that she wanted to become a nurse. That's why I pushed her to finish her education and become a nurse (Parent U1, Urban School, Interview, May 2023).*

"I am happy because my child eats at school, but sometimes the food is not enough for all the learners. Some days she tells me they got not enough food." Parent U2, Urban School, Interview, May 2023).

These results are in line with the answers parents provided in response to questions from the interview guide requesting them to attest to the fact that school lunches encouraged children to attend class. All of parents who were involved in this research had children in the school feeding programme, when parents were asked to provide information or identify specific issues with the school meal program in their community for the research, the majority of their answers focused on administrative matters. A few of the issues raised by the parents were addressed to the WFP. As an illustration, one parent said: *"..... as a parent I blame more on the programme in term of quantity of food because students reach at home likely lunch unsatisfied and I blame school leaders in term of bad management of school feeding because the government sets the contribution to be given by parent by referring to the market,..... (Parent R3, Rural School, FGD, May 2023).*

Most research participants stated that by lowering hunger and health problems, the school feeding program had improved children's academic performance and increased student enrollment.

Head teachers, students, and parents expressed similar views in the quotes that follow, saying that the school feeding program helped protect the kids from child labor abuse while also enabling them to attend class and concentrate on their studies.

"With the introduction of the school feeding program, there has been a decrease in the amount of students falling ill from hunger and passing out in class. Students find it simpler to attend class and stay on track as a result of this." (Head teacher, Rural School, interview, May 2023).

"The school feeding programme has helped improve attendance and reduced dropouts. Children are more active and focused. Before this programme, many learners would go home at midday and not return and sometimes remain in the urban without reaching their home, especially those from poor families. Now, they stay at school the whole day and even perform better in class." (Head teacher, Urban School, interview, May 2023).

"This programme is a blessing. Without it, many learners from vulnerable households, especially refugees, would not remain in school the whole day. Some children used to faint in class due to hunger. Now, after they eat, they are happy, more concentrated, and school feels like a safe place for them." (Head Teacher, refugee camp school, interview, May 2023)

"Before we started eating at school, I had to walk home and back again during lunch, and sometimes I would be late or miss afternoon lessons. Now I stay at school and concentrate more." (Learner R1, Rural school, FGD, May 2023)

Even though only a limited number of direct quotes were presented, most participants expressed similar views, especially regarding the positive impact of the programme on student enrolment, retention, and academic concentration. Parents and head teachers acknowledged that meals at school motivated learners to stay in class the whole day instead of leaving during lunchtime or skipping school entirely.

4.2 Implementation Practices and Stakeholder Roles

The type of school, its location, and the resources available all influence Rwanda's multi-stakeholder School Feeding Programme (SFP). The management of food logistics, hygienic standards, kitchen personnel, and parent involvement was mostly the responsibility of school officials, especially head teachers and school

feeding focal points. By tying nutrition to learning objectives, deputy head teachers made sure the meal schedule complemented academic activity.

Parental assistance was essential, frequently in the form of firewood, food contributions, or meal preparation assistance. The degree of participation varied, though, with some schools enjoying the advantages of robust parent-teacher groups and others seeing little involvement.

External agencies like WFP and NGOs offered crucial assistance with food supply and logistics at refugee camp schools like GS Kigeme.

Although this provided structure, it also brought attention to the need for improved coordination with local authorities and reliance on donor aid. On the other hand, rural schools depended on informal methods and community goodwill, while urban and government-aided schools had more structured procedures. All things considered, the SFP's success hinges on efficient cooperation, openness, and precisely defined stakeholder responsibilities. Enhancing these elements is crucial to guaranteeing the program's long-term viability and efficacy in various educational contexts.

Table 2: Implementation Practices and Stakeholder Roles:

Stakeholder	Roles and Responsibilities	Contextual Variations	Key Challenges
School Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Oversee daily coordination of meal provision - Manage kitchen staff and logistics - Ensure health & hygiene compliance - Coordinate with parents and partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More formalized roles in urban and government-aided schools - Often multitask in resource-limited rural schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited resources and infrastructure - Balancing feeding and academic schedules
Deputy of Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monitor timing of meals - Assess impact on learners' concentration and performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active role mainly in larger or better-resourced schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited direct involvement in some schools
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide food items, firewood, or labor support - Participate in parent-teacher associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High involvement in schools with active community engagement - Variable contribution in less engaged communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent contributions - Tensions due to unequal participation
External Partners (WFP, NGOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide food supplies and logistical support, especially in refugee camps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central role in refugee camp schools (e.g., Kigeme) - Support varies in rural and urban settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dependency on external funding - Coordination challenges with local authorities
Local Authorities & School Assemblies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate community meetings - Support policy and oversight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular engagement in some communities - Limited or irregular involvement in others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication gaps - Variable community ownership

This table summarizes the different roles, context-based variations, and challenges faced by each stakeholder group in the implementation of the School Feeding Programme.

4.3 Challenges encountered in implementation

Although the School Feeding Programme (SFP) has had positive effects on learner attendance, motivation, and nutrition, several persistent challenges continue to limit its impact. A common concern raised by school leaders, teachers, parents, and learners is the unreliable and insufficient supply of food. Delays in deliveries often due to budget shortages and weak logistics cause disruptions in meal provision, especially in rural and refugee-hosting schools.

Many schools also operate with poor infrastructure, lacking proper kitchens, food storage areas, and clean spaces. These conditions lead to delays in meal preparation, affect hygiene, and disrupt academic schedules. Additionally, while parental contributions are central to the programme's success, many households struggle to provide food, firewood, or labour due to economic difficulties. This inconsistency sometimes leads to conflict within communities and undermines collective engagement.

Learners and parents further expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and variety of meals, noting limited nutritional value and long waiting times during distribution. In refugee settings like Kigeme, schools are highly dependent on external organizations such as the WFP. While this support is essential, delays in donor

funding and coordination problems with local school staff can worsen food insecurity.

Overall, the programme faces multiple, interconnected obstacles—ranging from funding gaps and weak

infrastructure to irregular community support and operational inefficiencies—that threaten its long-term success. Addressing these challenges is key to improving the sustainability and effectiveness of school feeding in Rwanda.

Table 3: Challenges Encountered in Implementation

Challenge	Description	Affected Stakeholders	Impact on SFP
Inconsistent Food Supply	Irregular and insufficient delivery of food items due to financial and logistical issues, especially in rural and refugee contexts.	School leaders, learners, parents	Interruptions in meal provision, affecting attendance and nutrition.
Infrastructure Deficiencies	Lack of adequate kitchens, storage, and hygienic meal preparation facilities, leading to unsafe and inefficient operations.	School leaders, teachers, learners	Delays in meal preparation, compromised food safety, disruption of school schedule.
Inconsistent Parental Contributions	Economic hardship and competing priorities reduce parents' ability to provide food, firewood, or labor consistently.	Parents, school leaders	Reduced community ownership, tensions among families, operational challenges.
Meal Quality and Variety	Meals often lack nutritional diversity and adequate portion sizes, reducing satisfaction and potential health benefits.	Learners, parents	Lower learner motivation, potential negative effects on health and academic performance.
Logistical and Coordination Issues in Refugee Camps	Dependency on donor agencies causes delays; unclear coordination between humanitarian actors and school authorities.	Refugee learners, school leaders, donors	Food shortages, service interruptions, inefficient implementation.

While the School Feeding Programme (SFP) is widely recognized for its contribution to improving student enrolment, attendance, and concentration, its implementation across different school contexts in Rwanda specifically in Nyamagabe District has encountered a number of persistent challenges. Understanding these obstacles is critical to informing more effective, inclusive and sustainable programme delivery.

This sub-section presents the key challenges experienced by various stakeholders, including school leaders, parents, and learners, as they engage with the implementation of the SFP under the 12 Years Basic Education (12YBE) policy framework. Drawing on their perspectives, the analysis highlights issues such themes were found inadequate parental contributions, food shortages, delays in supply, poor food quality, limited infrastructure, and weak coordination among actors. These challenges vary across urban, rural, and refugee camp schools, reflecting the complex social and logistical dynamics that influence the success of school feeding initiatives.

These challenges affected the smooth delivery and sustainability of the programme and varied across different school contexts. The following quotations highlight some of the main difficulties faced by school leaders, parents, and learners; “Some parents delay their

contributions or refuse to give anything at all, yet they expect their children to eat daily. We often send messages home through children, or call parents for meetings, but many still don't respond. This makes planning very difficult.” (Head teacher U1, Urban school, Interview, May 2023)

“Sometimes the food is not enough. They give us small portions and we remain hungry until we go home in the evening.” (Learner R2, Rural school, FGD, May 2023)

“The beans are often undercooked and hard. Some students even get stomach problems, but we have no choice because we are hungry.” (Learner U1, Urban school, FGD, May 2023)

“There are days when food comes late or they say it's not available. We just wait, and sometimes we get nothing.” (Learner RC1, refugee camp school, FGD, May 2023)

Although not every individual participant's quotation is presented in this section head teachers, parents, and students who participated in focus groups discussion and interviews expressed similar worries about the physical and infrastructure constraints of the School Feeding Program, even though not all of their quotes are included in this section. Many responders underlined that their schools lacked the fundamental tools needed to carry out the program successfully. The lack of basic amenities including dining rooms, tables and seats.

These difficulties impact students' dignity and general well-being in addition to making daily meal preparation and delivery less efficient. Overall, the results show that the sustainability and efficacy of the School Feeding Program are still in path if basic utilities and infrastructure are not improved, especially in rural and refugee school settings.

4.4 Community Participation and Ownership

Community participation plays a vital role in the success and sustainability of Rwanda's School Feeding Programme (SFP), though levels of involvement vary significantly across different settings. In many rural and government-aided schools, parents and community members contributed food, firewood, and labour. Parent-teacher associations and management committees often coordinated these efforts, creating a sense of shared responsibility and enhancing programme ownership. As a result, these schools experienced fewer disruptions and greater satisfaction among stakeholders.

Conversely, schools in urban areas and refugee camps showed weaker community involvement. Economic struggles, limited understanding of the programme's goals, and reliance on external donors particularly in refugee settings reduced local ownership and active engagement. This sometimes led to feelings of detachment among parents and challenges in maintaining accountability.

Disparities in parents' ability to contribute also created tension in some communities, highlighting the need for fairer systems that consider differing economic realities. Moreover, the role of local leaders and school governance structures was inconsistent. While some facilitated strong communication and collective action, others lacked engagement, reducing opportunities for community support. Overall, strengthening the SFP requires inclusive, equitable community involvement. Raising awareness, addressing economic barriers, and reinforcing collaboration between schools and local actors are crucial for building lasting ownership and ensuring the programme's long-term success.

Table 4: Community Participation and Ownership

Aspect	Description	Rural/ Government-Aided Schools	Urban/ Refugee Camps	Implications for SFP
Level of Community Participation	Varies significantly; strong in some contexts, weak in others	High parental involvement in food contributions and labor	Lower parental involvement; reliance on external agencies	Strong participation supports smooth implementation; weak participation creates challenges
Parental Contributions	Parents contribute food, firewood, labor; some face economic challenges	Generally willing and active	Economic hardships reduce contributions	Unequal contributions lead to tensions, requiring equitable approaches
Role of Parent-Teacher Associations	Key in coordinating contributions and managing resources transparently	Active, functional committees	Limited engagement	Effective PTAs enhance ownership and coordination
Role of Local Authorities	Involvement varies; some facilitate meetings and decision-making; others less engaged	Regular meetings and good communication	Limited involvement	Strong local leadership supports mobilization and accountability
Impact of Refugee Context	Dependence on NGOs and donors reduces local community roles	N/A	Reduced community ownership; feelings of detachment	Need to empower local community for sustainability
Community Ownership	Shared responsibility enhances program sustainability	Strong in engaged communities	Weaker in less engaged communities	Ownership critical for resilience and long-term success
Challenges & Tensions	Economic disparities cause disagreements over contributions	Present but often managed	More pronounced due to vulnerabilities	Requires inclusive, context-sensitive strategies

The study revealed major differences in community participation across school types, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. In rural areas, some parents

consistently supported the School Feeding Programme (SFP) with food or labour. However, many others did not contribute, citing poverty or believing the government

alone should provide for students. This uneven involvement caused frustration among those who regularly participated.

Urban schools reported minimal parental engagement due to competing responsibilities and financial pressure. Parents often felt their existing support was sufficient, which led to poor attendance at school meetings and limited program support, increasing pressure on school staff.

In refugee settings, community contribution was even more restricted. Most families lacked the means to help materially due to reliance on humanitarian aid, even though many expressed willingness to engage. Limited inclusion in planning and decision-making processes across all contexts weakened parents' sense of ownership and accountability.

Despite these challenges, some rural schools demonstrated strong community involvement through school gardens and local committees. These approaches allowed non-monetary participation and fostered shared responsibility, helping improve sustainability.

To strengthen the SFP, participants stressed the importance of regular communication, community awareness, and inclusive planning. Without these, the programme's long-term success remains uncertain.

4.5 Sustainability and Proposals for Improvement

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of Rwanda's School Feeding Programme (SFP) demands a comprehensive approach that addresses funding, infrastructure, capacity building, and community ownership. Although the programme has achieved significant gains, stakeholders stressed that its future depends on resolving key systemic weaknesses.

A major concern was the heavy dependence on external funding—particularly in rural and refugee-hosting schools which creates uncertainty due to changing donor priorities. Participants called for stronger and more consistent government financing to reduce this vulnerability and fully embed the SFP into national policy frameworks.

Inadequate infrastructure was also identified as a major obstacle. Many schools operate with poor kitchen facilities, limited storage, and basic equipment, which affects food safety and efficiency. Investing in facility upgrades and maintenance was seen as essential to improve operations and the quality of services delivered to learners.

Participants highlighted the need to build stakeholder capacity, especially among cooks, parent committees, and school feeding coordinators. Training in nutrition, hygiene, and programme management would promote professionalism and accountability, strengthening trust in the system.

Community involvement emerged as a critical pillar of sustainability. Where parents and local leaders were active, schools faced fewer disruptions. However, inequality in contributions created tension in poorer areas. Stakeholders recommended fairer contribution systems and more awareness-raising to promote shared responsibility.

Lastly, the call for stronger monitoring and feedback mechanisms was consistent. Regular communication among schools, parents, and authorities could help resolve problems early and guide improvements. Data-driven planning and tighter policy coordination were seen as vital to increase transparency and impact.

In short, achieving a sustainable SFP requires coordinated action across finance, infrastructure, human resources, governance, and community participation to support student well-being and learning outcomes in the long term.

Table 5: Sustainability and Proposals for Improvement

Aspect	Current Situation	Challenges	Proposals for Improvement
Funding	Reliance on external donors; government subsidies initiated but limited	Funding instability and donor dependency	Increase predictable government funding; fully institutionalize SFP in national policy
Infrastructure	Inadequate kitchens, poor storage, lack of equipment	Food safety risks, inefficient meal preparation	Invest in facility upgrades, maintenance, and provision of essential equipment
Capacity Building	Limited ongoing training for cooks, focal persons, and parent committees	Lack of skills in nutrition, hygiene, and management	Provide regular, targeted training programs to improve professionalism and accountability
Community Participation	Variable engagement of parents and local leaders; disparities in contributions causing tensions	Unequal participation and reduced collaboration	Develop transparent and fair contribution systems; increase awareness and community ownership
Monitoring & Evaluation	Inconsistent data collection and feedback mechanisms	Delayed identification of problems, lack of adaptive management	Establish regular feedback loops; integrate data-driven monitoring and stronger coordination

This table summarizes the key sustainability issues and recommended actions to strengthen the School Feeding Programme’s long-term success.

Results show that the School Feeding Programme's (SFP) high reliance on erratic donor funds and inadequate infrastructure make its sustainability dubious. Concerns about delays or a lack of funding, which can lead to interrupted meal distribution, were raised by stakeholders and school officials. In order to lessen reliance on outside partners, they underlined the necessity for the Rwandan government to establish a steady and sustainable budget line for the initiative. Infrastructure was cited by several participants as a crucial issue in need of development. Even when food is available, schools frequently struggle due to a lack of clean water, inadequate cooking facilities, and limited storage capacity.

These issues jeopardize the dependability and safety of food. To increase program resilience, stakeholders suggested making investments in rainwater harvesting systems, upgraded kitchens, and food storage units. Another important component of sustainability was thought to be community involvement. In order to maintain fairness and consistency, participants suggested that parent and community contributions be organized and regular, possibly through official agreements or policies. Building trust and accountability was suggested through inclusive committee monitoring, increased openness in food management, and training for kitchen employees.

To provide fresh produce and lessen their reliance on outside sources, some rural schools have started using agriculture-based strategies, like school gardens. However, the efficacy of these projects is restricted by a

lack of expertise, resources, and land. In addition to maintaining feeding operations, growing and professionalizing such initiatives might provide students with useful agricultural skills.

“Clear legislation or regulations that require parents and schools to make regular contributions should be in place. These days, it’s uneven and voluntary; some parents give, while others don’t. When outside assistance fails, the program wouldn’t fail if everyone contributed. We require a system based on shared accountability.”
Urban School Parent

“To be honest, the program is crucial, but I’m concerned about its potential duration. Occasionally, the money is delayed or never arrives. Children go without food and the school struggles as a result. I believe that a permanent government budget that isn’t only dependent on donors is necessary for the program to be sustainable. Additionally, communities must be empowered and trained to participate regularly rather than only when coerced.”
School Head teacher

Implementation Models and Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis of Rwanda’s School Feeding Programme (SFP) revealed diverse experiences shaped by the specific implementation models adopted across school types and the ways in which stakeholders were involved in programme delivery. These findings align closely with the framework described in Section 2.2 and are best understood through the lenses of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), as discussed in Section 2.3. Together, these perspectives illuminate how implementation

modalities and stakeholder roles interact to influence programme effectiveness, equity, and sustainability particularly within the socio-economic and political realities of Rwanda.

Centralized, Decentralized, and Hybrid Models in Practice

The findings confirm that Rwanda's SFP does not adhere to a uniform model but reflects a combination of decentralized and hybrid approaches tailored to context. In most public primary and secondary schools, a decentralized, community-based model is employed where schools and parents collaborate in meal preparation sometimes contributing food, labor or financial support. This mirrors practices in Ghana and Kenya where decentralized models have been credited for promoting community ownership and local accountability (Gelli et al., 2010; Ahmed, 2004).

However, the effectiveness of this model depends heavily on local capacity. In rural or impoverished areas parents' ability to contribute consistently is limited leading to variations in meal quality and regularity. As observed in India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme similar challenges emerge when decentralized systems rely on communities with unequal resource bases (Drèze & Goyal, 2003). In Rwanda such disparities reveal one of the key weaknesses of decentralized models: while they foster ownership and local relevance they can also reproduce or worsen inequality if not complemented by government support.

This issue brings into focus the exosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory where district authorities and national ministries are expected to bridge resource gaps. However, delayed disbursements weak monitoring and limited infrastructure as reported by participants indicate significant structural limitations also noted by Bundy et al. (2009) in their analysis of school feeding in sub-Saharan Africa.

In refugee hosting schools a hybrid model operates through partnerships between the Government of Rwanda and the World Food Programme (WFP). While WFP handles logistics, procurement and funding, local officials ensure compliance with national standards. Similar hybrid arrangements in countries like Syria and South Sudan have been effective in ensuring regularity and nutrition quality (WFP, 2013) but they raise sustainability concerns. Dependency on external actors as Stakeholder Theory warns may weaken national ownership if transition plans and local integration are not clearly established (Freeman, 1984; Sidaner et al., 2013).

Stakeholder Roles and the Realities of Collaboration

Stakeholder Theory helps explain how varying degrees of involvement among key actors affect SFP

performance. In Rwanda, effective implementation relied on clearly defined roles and active coordination among learners, parents, teachers, school leaders, government institutions, and development partners.

Parents were seen as vital to the sustainability of decentralized models echoing findings from Gelli and Espejo (2013) who observed that community participation fosters resilience. Yet, in low-income settings parents expressed fatigue and dissatisfaction over being expected to contribute consistently without support a sentiment also recorded in Ethiopia (Tegegne et al., 2019). This mismatch between stakeholder responsibilities and capacities underscores one of Stakeholder Theory's central challenges: ensuring that engagement expectations are matched with equitable support mechanisms.

School leaders and teachers were frontline implementers overseeing meal distribution and managing local contributions. Their adaptability was commendable but many felt overburdened by administrative and logistical pressures echoing similar findings from Kenya and Mozambique (Bundy et al., 2009). These actors represent the microsystem and mesosystem levels in Ecological Systems Theory where direct daily interactions shape programme realities. The strain on school staff suggests the need for more robust support structures at the mesosystem level, particularly in capacity building and technical assistance.

At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, MINEDUC and local authorities are tasked with providing resources and ensuring policy implementation. However, challenges like underfunding, limited storage infrastructure, and bureaucratic delays signal systemic inefficiencies. This resonates with UNESCO's (2020) call for stronger coordination between national governments and decentralized education authorities to improve school feeding implementation.

Development partners like WFP played an indispensable role in refugee schools, ensuring supply chain continuity and nutrition standards. However, over-reliance on external funding introduces risks related to sustainability and long-term ownership concerns echoed by the World Bank (2012) which emphasizes the importance of integrating donor-driven programmes into national systems through gradual transitions.

Lessons from Context-Sensitive Implementation

The success of Rwanda's School Feeding Programme (SFP) is closely linked to how well it aligns with local contexts. The decentralized approach works best in communities with strong parental involvement and social cohesion. However, in areas with limited resources, this model faces serious challenges, especially when families are unable to consistently contribute either financially or

in kind. Such inconsistencies affect the regularity and fairness of meal provision, a problem also documented in similar programmes in countries like India and Nigeria (Drèze & Goyal, 2003; Adelman et al., 2008).

In contrast, the hybrid model used in refugee settings provides more stable service delivery because of donor involvement, but it raises equity issues. The difference in quality and consistency between refugee and non-refugee schools highlights a key policy tension: how to create a feeding system that is both fair and sustainable across diverse school settings.

Literature cautions against applying a "one-size-fits-all" strategy in school feeding programmes. Instead, success requires flexible models that empower local actors while ensuring consistent support from national institutions (Bundy et al., 2009; FAO & WFP, 2018). In Rwanda, the decentralized model promotes local ownership but risks deepening inequalities when families cannot contribute equally. This is particularly true in rural public schools where household poverty is high, making it harder for communities to uphold the programme independently.

To overcome these issues, strong national coordination must go hand in hand with localized capacity-building. Equipping school leaders and parents with tools and knowledge to manage the programme effectively is essential. Moreover, regularly gathering feedback from stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and learners—can help improve the relevance and effectiveness of the programme at the grassroots level.

In summary, Rwanda's experience shows that striking the right balance between centralized policy and local action is key to making the SFP both equitable and sustainable. Ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged, supported, and empowered will enhance the programme's long-term impact on both education and nutrition outcomes.

Bridging Theory and Practice in School Feeding Implementation

Rwanda's School Feeding Programme (SFP) illustrates how theoretical frameworks such as Ecological Systems Theory and Stakeholder Theory can explain the complexity of educational nutrition initiatives. The Ecological Systems Theory helps to understand how school-level practices (microsystem), community-school relationships (mesosystem), administrative support and funding (exosystem), and national policies with global partnerships (macrosystem) all interact to shape the success or failure of the programme. For example, active community involvement through parent contributions or school gardens reflects the importance of the mesosystem, while national strategies and donor frameworks define the broader structural support needed for sustainability.

Stakeholder Theory further highlights the importance of inclusive engagement, coordination, and balanced power among key actors such as parents, school leaders, government bodies, NGOs, and donors. While decentralized and hybrid models allow for community ownership and flexibility, their effectiveness depends heavily on local capacity and national support. In vulnerable or low-income settings, expecting communities to shoulder full responsibility without adequate assistance risks deepening inequality.

Hybrid models used in refugee schools show the potential of multisector collaboration but also expose challenges due to dependency on external aid. To avoid such limitations, the study emphasizes the importance of adaptive, locally tailored models backed by coherent policy, clear roles, and consistent funding. The research echoes prior studies suggesting that school feeding should be viewed as part of broader social protection and development systems, not just as a food delivery service. Rwanda's experience shows that alignment between policy, local action, and stakeholder collaboration is key to ensuring impact, equity, and long-term sustainability of school feeding programmes.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the practical experiences, perceptions, and challenges tied to the implementation of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) across various school environments in Rwanda. The findings highlight that the SFP has had a clear and positive influence on learners' educational participation, especially regarding school attendance, classroom concentration, and general academic engagement. School meals were consistently described by school leaders, parents, and learners as a powerful incentive that motivates students to attend classes regularly and perform better. For many children from poor or remote backgrounds, the meals served at school often represent their only dependable source of food, emphasizing the programme's importance not only in promoting education but also in tackling child hunger and malnutrition.

The study also shed light on the diverse models and coordination mechanisms used across public, government-supported, and refugee-based schools. While some schools operate under decentralized approaches with strong community involvement, others rely heavily on external actors such as non-governmental organizations and international partners. The presence of feeding focal persons, school heads, parents, and external donors in different roles reflects the programme's reliance on multi-stakeholder collaboration, shaped by each school's socio-economic and geographic context.

Nonetheless, implementation is not without challenges. Limited financial resources, poor infrastructure, irregular meal supply, and unequal parental participation were widely reported as barriers to the programme's effectiveness and sustainability. These issues are more acute in rural and refugee settings, where schools often lack adequate kitchens, food storage facilities, or access to reliable suppliers. Parental contributions, though essential in some areas, were inconsistent and sometimes a source of tension, especially where poverty made it difficult for all families to participate equally.

Community ownership emerged as a major factor influencing the smooth running of the SFP. Schools that cultivated inclusive and transparent engagement with parents and local leaders reported more stable operations and a stronger sense of shared responsibility. This supports wider research suggesting that meaningful community involvement can help improve the resilience and long-term impact of school feeding initiatives.

5.2 Recommendations

1. To strengthen the programme's future, the study recommends targeted reforms. These include increased government investment in infrastructure and food supply systems, clearer policy support at the national level, improved monitoring and feedback mechanisms, and ongoing training for those managing the programme. Additionally, ensuring that implementation is sensitive to the unique needs of urban, rural, and refugee contexts will be key in promoting equity.

2. In summary, Rwanda's School Feeding Programme has become an essential pillar in promoting learner well-being and educational access. Addressing the systemic and contextual barriers through coordinated, inclusive strategies can ensure the programme continues to support vulnerable learners and contributes meaningfully to national goals related to education, health, and social protection.

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