

Enhancing Education through Meal Support: A Qualitative Investigation



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I. Introduction

A report by the World Food Program in 2022 states that approximately 41% of children enrolled in primary schools in the world have access to school meals. But when it comes to nutritious school meals, only about 18% of children from low-income countries are able to access quality meals at school. (1)

The case is even more evident in the majority of community primary schools in Nepal. Almost many of the community primary schools in Nepal have a provision for feeding school children with food worth NPR 15 only. This is because the government structure has allocated a budget of NPR 15 per student for primary-level public or community schools in Nepal. In recent times, some local governments in Nepal have increased the budget allocation for meals including access to higher-grade students.

Some reports and evidence often reflect that there is a direct proportion between school-hour meals and dropout rates among students, particularly in low-income countries like Nepal. A study done by JICA in the early 2000s in Dhading and Siraha reports that hunger was one of the prime factors for increasing drop-out rates among students. (2) The Zero Hunger Strategic Review (ZHSR), conducted in 2017-18, found that Nepal still suffers from serious food insecurity and malnutrition despite commendable progress on these fronts. It also outlined a series of recommendations to address the problem. The case of food insecurity has jeopardized student enrollment at public schools in Nepal because of little or no access to proper food supplies.

After the initiative like Mid-day Meal Scheme was introduced in 2017 by the World Food Programme along with the Government of Nepal, it has been observed that there have been drastic changes in school attendance among children at primary levels. However, the intervention as such has created more scattered underlying issues in recent times.

1. Extracted from: <https://publications.wfp.org/2022/state-of-school-feeding>

2. Extracted from:

https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/project/nepal/0602442/02/pdf/Dropout_children_of_Dhading_and_Siraha_2004_Nov.pdf

II. Problems

The field study and observation from various municipalities have often reflected serious complications with mid-day meal interventions. On one hand, meal program has become imperative to sustain quality education, reduce the drop-out rates, and enhance the well-being of the children. On the other domain, a plethora of issues have emerged in recent times in the context of regularities, ethics, management, and budget allocation.

The government intended to come up with an NPR 15 per student plan for the community schools to adopt in their midday meal program to ensure that children get a healthy and nutritious diet. However, an endline study by USAID in 2022 about the food program highlighted that the budget allocation of NPR 15 per student is massively low and has encouraged or forced the school and students to opt for packed food instead. (3) Similar incidents have been observed during our field visits. Some schools have reported serving uncooked meals for the children because of no human resources to cook meals and serve them during school time. (4)

On the contrary, an increase in the budget if not monitored properly is likely to fall into the wrong hands. The cases of corruption that peaked with the meal program intervention are rising; particularly in the lower plain areas of Nepal where awareness and literacy are a major concern. (5) Furthermore, our current observation and field study also supports the evidence that lack of monitoring of the meal support program at community school could result in irregularities and continued disintegration of educational provisions in Nepal. Likewise, the government has been supporting the funds to the community school with an expectation of providing cooked and quality meals for the students. However, there's no concrete proof or evidence that the schools have been utilizing those funds for meals. Some schools are unable to supply food regularly as required. In general, the dropout rate might look to have been reduced to some extent but a food hunt for the student continues to exist.

Irregular meal support and lack of proper meal facilities are yet another concern for students who were motivated to continue school enrollment. Our recent scoping visit to a few schools in Dhading district suggested that the ongoing inflation rate in the market restricts the schools from buying essentials for a meal, ultimately depriving students of a completely balanced meal. The government perhaps needs to work on the budget adjustment in this regard. The instruments for regular meal monitoring are perhaps a big challenge for the concerned authority to track the meals at the community schools.



3. Narrative from: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZJPW.pdf

4. Field-based insight

5. Extracted from: <https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-2/2022/07/22/midday-meal-scheme-in-corruption-controversy-in-madhes-districts>

III. Policy Options and Opportunities

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Description</i>
Monitoring and Evaluation	Developing M & E policy for Meal Program and implementing it	A proper monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be developed to ensure that community schools are regularly providing school hour meal to the students. A locally appointed resource person who will monitor the progress can be effective way for regulating the program.
Institutional Collaboration	Encouraging collaboration between school, local government, civil societies and industries	Local government should encourage civil societies and private companies to collaborate with schools to provide quality and hygienic meals for students.
Budget Adjustment	Increasing Budget in all the municipalities	A substantial increment in the existing budget framework on school meals might be a crucial intervention to ensure that schools have enough resources to provide balanced meal to the students.
Incentive Model	Rewarding as a Model School for best community school	Introducing an incentive model for all the community schools could encourage competition between the schools to provide quality meals for the students.
Withdrawal Model	Punishing institution if failed to organize meal support	Develop a withdrawal model where the local government can withdraw the school meal scheme in case the school is irregular in meal support despite the resources.
Redistributive Model	Budget allocation based on different criterias	Allocating resources based on: geography, infrastructure, community, and other relevant factors might be crucial.

IV. Discussion

Despite the government's plan to support quality education for children from community schools in Nepal, there are many loopholes that need to be addressed. Be it from the policy or institutional perspective, there is a need for substantial revision in terms of budget allocation, program framework, and regulation.

Some important reflections from this brief can be highlighted as:

- Meal Support has been integral in improving the attendance rate (reduced drop-out rate as well) of students in community schools in Nepal
- The quality of education has been improved with the school meal program because of student's motivation to attend school, their attention to detail, and classroom engagement
- Despite the positive intervention of the meal program, lack of regulation has jeopardized the model of the program
- The budget revision is reported to be the primary adjustment in the existing school meal program
- A strong monitoring and evaluation mechanism is required to sustain the impact of the meal program at schools and therefore promote a healthy environment at schools
- An incentive model is found to be very effective to reward schools who have performed well in the meal support for the students
- A withdrawal model could be applicable to schools that are falling behind in terms of meal program management despite the availability of resources
- A redistributive model should be a very important approach to ensure that resources are distributed on an equity basis following criteria like geography (or remoteness), community, infrastructure, the school with better performance, and related criteria

Meal Support Program has been an imperative and life-changing intervention mostly in rural areas of Nepal where the majority of children go to school hungry with an expectation of having school meals. Therefore, to envision a Nepal with greater access to quality education, formalizing meal program effectively and ensuring the accessibility of every child with balanced school meals is crucial.