

# School feeding bolsters enrolment in Karamoja

Teachers and officials say children, especially those whose families struggle to get meals, go to school because food is provided.

BY DAMALI MUKHAYE

While the government is formulating a National School Feeding Policy that will soon be rolled out across the country to keep learners in school and improve performance, Karamoja has already reported remarkable success.

The sub-region is showing how a simple hot meal can boost education.

Years of hunger and food insecurity has forced families in Karamoja to depend heavily on relief supplies and community feeding initiatives.

Through coordinated efforts by development partners, local governments, and school administrators, the region has witnessed a turnaround.

Children who once dropped out of school to herd animals or dig for food now sit in class because of a meal.

Heads of institutions revealed that when schools in the sub-region run out of food, attendance, especially in primary schools, drops drastically.

For many of these learners, the hot meal provided at school is the only one they will eat that day, as hunger and food insecurity remain a reality across several districts in Karamoja, forcing children to rely on school meals.

While some might argue that most of these children attend school merely for food, the programme has become a powerful tool for keeping them in class.

Development partners, including the World Food Programme (WFP), and heads of institutions say the feeding initiative has not only increased enrolment but also improved learner retention and performance in the region.

Statistics from WFP indicated that the school feeding programme in the region has led to a 16 percent rise in enrolment and improved attendance from 57 percent to 71 percent.

In an interview with the *Daily Monitor*, the Head teacher of Pajar Primary School in Kaabong District, Mr Okello Kizito, said the feeding programme has given children a reason to wake up and go to school, even when home conditions are harsh.

He explained that in schools, one can easily tell when food runs out because learner attendance drops drastically.

"Food attracts many learners. When food gets finished here, learners do not come. It is hard to have a total of 1,000 attending school when food is finished," Mr Okello said earlier this month.

He further explained that the school has an enrolment of 2,363 learners, with more girls (1,230) than boys (1,133).

"Learners are attracted to school because of the continuous supply of food recently. We have the highest number of pupils in the entire district," he said.

Similarly, the Head teacher of Kalongar Primary School, Ms Dorothy Adongo, said school meals in the sub-region



Pupils of Kalongar Primary School in Karamoja Sub-region, line up for porridge at break time. PHOTO/ DAMALI MUKHAYE

have helped to boost learner attendance while reducing malnutrition and gender-based violence against children, especially the female learners.

"There is an improvement compared to previous years. You know this district is among the hunger-stricken districts in the [sub] region. So, you find that hunger pushes learners to schools where they know food is a guarantee," Ms Adongo said.

She added: "Distribution of food has thus contributed greatly to the retention of learners in schools because when they eat breakfast and lunch at school, they cover the gap at their homes because when they go home, they have none. This makes them stay at school because they know there is nothing to eat at home."

Ms Adongo said some homes have one meal a day, usually in the evening. Hence, if children can have meals at

school, that gap is greatly covered.

"Food is a trap, therefore, keeping learners at school. When we have no food, the numbers we get at school that day are very few compared to when we have food," she said.

As the government moves to implement the national school feeding policy, Karamoja's experience offers a clear lesson that sometimes, keeping a child in school begins with a plate of food.

**320**  
SCHOOLS PROVIDE MEALS

## WFP feeding 255,000 learners

The World Food Programme (WFP), in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Sports, is currently supporting school feeding in 320 schools across Karamoja, reaching about 255,000 learners daily with two meals.

The learners eat porridge in the morning and have lunch in the afternoon as part of efforts to improve education out-

comes and child nutrition.

While a significant portion of the support comes from the World Food Programme (WFP) through donations and mobilisation, the Government of Uganda (GoU) in this financial year (2025/2026) allocated Shs500 million to purchase food for learners.

The funds will be provided annually to supplement ongoing donor contributions.

Mr James Kingori, the head of WFP in Karamoja, in an interview with *Daily Monitor*, said the initiative covers all nine districts of Karamoja and extends to Katakwi in the Teso Sub-region. Karamoja comprises the districts of Karamoja, Kaabong, Kotido, Abim, Napak, Nakapiripirit, Moroto, Nabilatuk, and Amudat.

The food provided mainly consists of cereal-based dishes such as rice or maize, complemented by pulses like beans and cooking oil. WFP is also introducing green gram for additional protein and green vegetables to improve

## ABOUT SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME POLICY

In December 2024, the government made a U-turn and announced plans to begin feeding learners in all public schools across the country, a significant shift in education policy. The Minister of Education, Ms Janet Museveni, made the revelation during the presentation of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) Manifesto Progress Report for the ministry in financial year 2024/2025.

She disclosed that the ministry had approved proposals to include school feeding in the national bud-

get for the 2025/2026 financial year. "This is a programme that is ongoing and we hope and pray that perhaps by 2026, the government may have found a way to provide feeding in schools, at least for primary schools to start with," Ms Museveni said.

State Minister for Higher Education, Mr John Chrysostom Muyingo, told *Daily Monitor* that the formulation of the national school feeding programme is underway and the country will be briefed once it is ready. "The ministry put up a committee to develop this policy and I am hopeful they are in its final stages," he said.

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Dr Kendrace Turyagyenda, did not pick her calls when we attempted to contact her regarding the progress of the said committee. However, sources indicated that the committee is in the final stages of formulating the policy as they conduct consultations with key stakeholders across the country.

Once finalised, the government will be required not only to incur the cost of buying food for all learners in public schools but also to equip schools with kitchens, utensils, storage rooms, and pay cooks to ensure meals are prepared daily.

nutrition in the sub-region.

However, about 30 percent of the schools in Karamoja, about 80 community schools, are not part of the feeding programme, and the differences are stark. These schools, according to WFP officials, are privately owned.

Mr Kingori said schools that do not provide meals face high absenteeism and dropout rates as hungry children find it difficult to stay in class. In contrast, schools under the feeding programme have higher enrolment and retention rates.

"In schools where children get meals, attendance is consistent and learning outcomes are better. But community schools that are not covered often struggle because children come to class hungry or stay at home altogether," he explained.

Mr Kingori also revealed that the government is set to use Karamoja's school feeding policy as a blueprint for the forthcoming national policy. He added that whereas several children go to school to eat, they end up learning something at the end of the day.

"There is usually no food at their homes, so they go to school to eat food, and at the end of the day they are learning something," he said.

Ms Olivia Adoch, the WFP Programme Policy Officer, said to promote local production and improve community livelihoods, WFP has been purchasing school food from local farmers.

Initially, food was brought in from neighbouring districts, meaning the people of Karamoja were not benefiting directly. As a result, WFP now buys maize and beans from within the sub-region to feed learners.

"We usually send out expressions of interest and farmers with enough produce tend to bid jointly. So far, we have about 10 farmers' organisations on our roster, and these have mastered the art of providing quality produce," Ms Adoch said.

She added that WFP packages maize and beans according to the number of learners in each school and delivers the items to respective schools for a full term.

Schools with milling capacity produce maize flour, commonly known as *posho*, while others without the means boil maize and beans together.

Also, schools are required to meet the cost of paying cooks, with heads of institutions indicating that each learner is expected to contribute Shs30,000 to cater for expenses such as milling *posho*, paying cooks, and other related needs.

## Feeding during holidays

For more than 60 years, WFP has provided food aid in Karamoja, but the agency is now shifting its focus from dependency to empowering communities to produce their own food.

The new approach, supported by donors such as the governments of Ireland and China, and the Novo Nordisk Foundation, emphasises local production and sustainability.

"It is high time we recognise Karamoja's capacity and potential. We are moving away from bringing food from outside the region to empowering communities to feed themselves," Mr Kingori said.

Under the Homegrown School Feeding Programme, WFP purchases food from local farmers, who are organised into groups for bulking and storage.

Last year alone, WFP purchased food worth \$1.9 million (about Shs6.85 billion) from Karamoja farmers, a record for local procurement that significantly boosted the local economy.

The food grown within communities also helps feed learners during holidays.