



Children take porridge during a break time. PHOTOS/GEOFFREY MUTUMBA

Why improving meals for learners matters

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BY OUR REPORTER

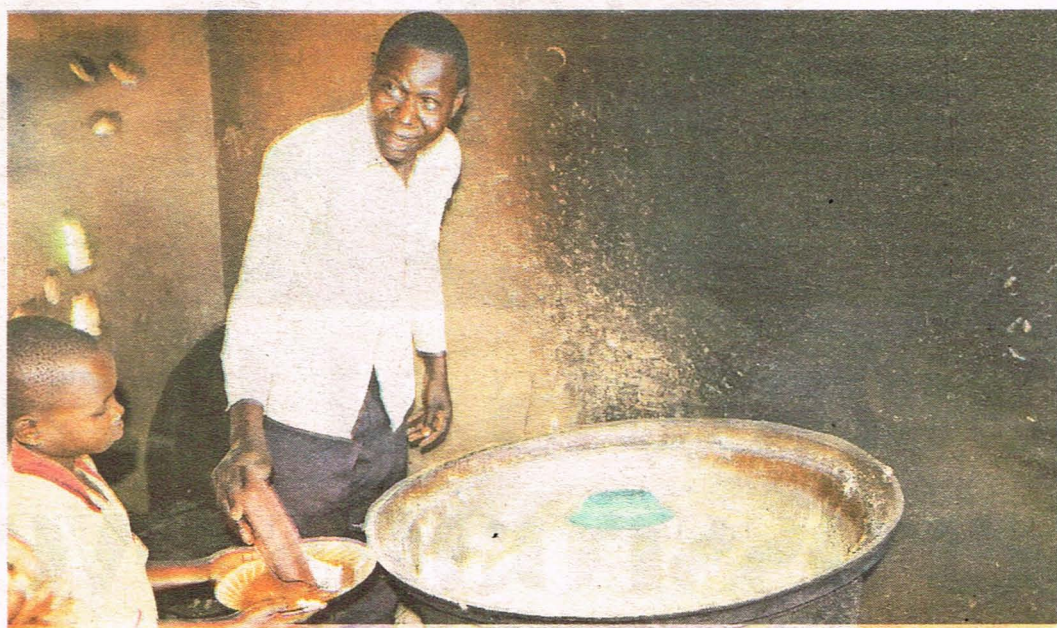
The first term is here now and for many it is plain schooling. But for those whose schools are located in the rural areas, life is quite rough.

Lunch time consists of children gathering around a large sauce pan of watery beans and posho. Education and Health experts agree that it is not an ideal meal, but for many years, that has been the standard.

Last year the Health ministry agreed to set up a committee to study means of improving the diet for learners. The plan is for schools to ensure affordable nutritious meals are available to all, regardless of location or income levels, according to Ms Grace Ocheng, a principal nutritionist in the Ministry of Health.

"We are looking for food that is affordable but nutritious. When you have a monotonous diet like posho and beans, we may not be able to access some of the most needed food values," she says.

The debate centres around including fortified cooking oil into the food to prevent malnutrition-induced diseases and deaths. This follows reports indicating that over the last 10 years, some 500,000 learners were adversely impacted with malnutrition.



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Just for effect, nutrition-induced illnesses are responsible for four out of every 10 deaths in children under the age of five. This is intended to also avoid stunting.

A stunted child is not adversely affected nutritionally but also mentally. So, the government is considering consulting communities on which foods can be included in school meals to make it more affordable for parents, who support the schools.

"We are asking parents what foods are common in particular areas so that the school menus in the schools there can incorporate such foods," Ms Ocheng adds. "We anticipate that for instance in Acholi, foods like simsim, vegetables can be added to the menu, since they are locally available

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foods in these areas."

Mr David Kabanda, the executive director for Center for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFRO-HT), says the issue of contamination of food should be considered. "Many children are fed on food

that is contaminated with pathogens or chemicals," Mr Kabanda says. With some parts of the country, especially in northeastern Uganda, suffering food shortages, Mr Kabanda wants the government to spend more money on improving nutrition - but also directing how learners get food, so they can feed well.

"The government has been encouraging a parent-led feeding system, which is unsustainable," he says. "11 percent of all Ugandans suffer acute food insecurity, which means they can feed themselves. So the government should take charge of this process."

Eight months after the government promised to deliver a viable diet for learners, there is little to show.