



Transforming Education and Food Systems with Homegrown Nutritious School Meals: Highlights from the 20th CAADP Policy Partnership Meeting and 15th ADFNS

As part of the 20th Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Partnership Platform Meeting and the 15th commemoration of the African Day for Food and Nutrition Security (ADFNS), held in Harare in October-November 2024, HarvestPlus and the African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD) co-hosted a side event "*Building Sustainable Safe and Nutritious Homegrown School Feeding Programs.*" The side event highlighted the need to accelerate the transformation of the current Homegrown School Feeding Programs (HGSFP) into school meals that are sustainable, safe and nutritious.

Why is transitioning from HGSFP to Homegrown School Meal Programs (HGSMP) sustainable, safe and nutritious?

By their nature, HGSFP play a critical role in ensuring that the cost of shipping food for school meals is reduced by sourcing ingredients locally; the approach provides opportunities for growing local economies and providing structured markets to smallholder farmers, while ensuring that learners eat foods, they are already familiar with. While current school feeding programs are dominated by staple foods that are low in critical micronutrients like zinc, iron and vitamin A. Increasing awareness and availability of staples that are rich in micronutrients provides an opportunity to switch and transform the HGFSP into nutritious school meals. Available evidence shows that eating biofortified foods increases intake of essential micronutrients like vitamin A, zinc, and iron. This increased micronutrient intake supports cognitive and physical development in children, leading to improved learning outcomes. The micronutrient rich foods are proven to reduce illnesses, ensure better school attendance, and improve learning skills, memory, and immunity against diseases. Conventionally bred nutrient-rich staples, also known as biofortified crops—such as vitamin A maize, zinc rice, and iron beans—are locally grown by smallholder farmers. Prioritizing their inclusion in school meals delivers triple benefits: healthier learners, improved educational outcomes, and structured markets for smallholder farmers, boosting local economies. For girls, reducing school absenteeism can also help prevent early marriages and child labor.

The key emerging issues and takeaways from the CAADP PP side event

Presenters from Kenya, Malawi, and Nigeria, along with subsequent discussions, highlighted key policy and strategic innovations, models, and gaps within the current HGSFP. A primary gap identified was the low awareness of micronutrient-rich staple foods and their role in school meals. Other challenges included unsustainable funding models causing frequent disruptions in school feeding programs, a fragmented and siloed approach at the national level, and a lack of clear policy direction. The presentations provided participants an opportunity to discuss and explore solutions to the identified gaps. They highlighted the use of micronutrient-rich staples as key ingredients in school meals, transforming them into more nutritious options in Kenya, Malawi, and India. Additionally, the successful domestication of AUDA-NEPAD-led policy guidelines by five AU member states was

showcased as a strategic entry point and lever for driving the effective, rapid, and efficient transformation of school meals. Key additional takeaways included:

- **Rebranding for Better Impact:** The shift from "school feeding programs" to safe "Nutritious Homegrown School Meal Programs" (NHGSMP) underscores the new focus on nutrition, food safety, and the need to broaden the benefits of school meals beyond just feeding to improve attendance.
- **Nutrition for Better Human Capital Development:** Nutritious meals enhance cognitive development, improve numerical skills and memory, and contribute to better learning outcomes and human capital development agenda across Africa.
- **Collaboration for Sustainability:** Multi-sectoral platforms involving education, health, agriculture, and the private sector emerged as a key cornerstone for success. Partnerships with seed companies and food processors can drive the demand for nutrient-rich staples, ensuring economic viability of agriculture and sustainability of nutritious school meals.
- **Recognizing The Role of Strategic Entry Points:** These can act as levers that can trigger rapid and widespread transformation of the current HGSFP to NHGSMP. School heads and First Ladies' forums too, working with farmer cooperatives or producer organizations to ramp up supply of micronutrient rich staples. The First Ladies' Forum serves as a strategic platform in Africa to catalyze positive social transformation by collaborating with stakeholders, such as school heads and farmer cooperatives, to enhance the supply of micronutrient-rich staples for programs like the HGSFP and NHGSMP.

Identifying and Overcoming Barriers

Despite its potential, scaling the Nutritious Home-Grown School Meals Program (NHGSMP) faces several challenges. These include unethical broker practices that underpay farmers while making excessive profits, driving up costs for schools to purchase micronutrient-rich staples; low or fragmented production of these staples; delayed payments to farmers, prompting them to sell their crops to alternative markets; and restrictive public procurement policies that hinder direct local food sourcing from farmers. Overcoming these barriers will require transparent value chains, innovative funding mechanisms, and supportive procurement policies.

The roadmap to transforming school meals

The event concluded with actionable recommendations, including:

- **Policy Integration:** accelerating the domestication of AUDA-NEPAD guidelines on HGSFP by AU member states.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** packaging and active sharing of lessons and successful models to replicate these in multiple countries ensuring accelerated transformation of school meals.
- **Private Sector Engagement and Innovative Funding Models:** promoting the model that encourages the private sector of different types and backgrounds across sectors, to adopt schools and support the NHGSMP as part of corporate social responsibility, for them to get more tax rebates – this requires a supporting government policy too.

- **Other Innovative Funding Models:** replicate parent led funding models that have been successful especially for Early Childhood Development Centers in Malawi and Kenya; promoting school managed agricultural plots that grow micronutrient rich staples and feed into the NHGSMP for improved sustainability.

Moving Forward: A Call to Action

The side event underscored that the National Home-Grown School Meals Program (NHGSMP) is more than a means to feed children; it is a strategic investment in Africa's future. By addressing malnutrition and enhancing learning outcomes, these programs strengthen human capital while creating structured markets for smallholder farmers. They serve as a beacon of hope for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, fulfilling the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063, and ensuring every child has access to nutritious meals.

HarvestPlus, AUDA-NEPAD, and their development partners continue to lead this effort, showcasing how naturally bred, micronutrient-rich crops can play a pivotal role in school meals and contribute to the broader transformation of food systems.