



RINUS VAN KLINKEN > SCHOOL CHILDREN

Parents should contribute to children's school feeding

A majority of school children in public schools in Uganda attend day-schools. The bulk of these schools do not provide mid-day meals to learners. Children leave home very early and often with no breakfast and study all day on empty stomach. Figures from a recent government survey indicate that two thirds of all primary school children do not get any break or lunch during the entire school day. This constitutes no less than a national crisis.

Teachers observe that the lessons they deliver during the second half of the day get much less attention from pupils than the first half. What teaching can take place and is effective when the rumblings of the tummy drown out the voice of the teacher? The government has for long grappled with this problem. It is faced on the one hand with the challenge that it cannot afford to feed all primary school children, currently estimated at 14 million. On the other hand, it feels pressurised not to charge parents additional funds, as free primary education is a public good with political support.

Within this environment, the Ministry of Education faced challenges in implementing its school feeding guidelines that stipulates that parents should take responsibility for feeding their children in schools. When SNV Netherlands Development Organisation offered to pilot these guidelines, it promised full support. In 2016, SNV through its dairy project funded by the Dutch government launched a national school milk pilot to get 5,000 school going children taking parent-provided milk while at school. The pilot was launched in six districts within the cattle corridor where SNV is imple-

“The challenge. Teachers observe that the lessons they deliver during the second half of the day get much less attention from pupils than the first half. What teaching can take place and is effective when the rumblings of the tummy drown out the voice of the teacher?”

menting the dairy project. Within one year, 80,400 children were taking parent-provided milk in school on a daily basis.

Ankole region is associated with its long-horned cattle, and is one of the highest milk producing areas in the country. Milk is in abundance throughout the year. Despite this abundance, most of the children still go to school without drinking milk, a factor that has contributed to the high malnutrition rate in the region with stunting at 42 per cent. With political support from the district leadership, schools were supported to convene parents' meetings to discuss the proposal to have them fund the purchase of milk from local producers and cooperatives for their children.

Parents are sensitised about the benefits of the school milk programme and are encouraged to contribute money towards the purchase of milk for their children to take during break time. It is the parents' sole responsibility to mobilise funds to buy milk and other consumables like firewood to boil the milk. As with many community processes, while some progressive parents embraced the suggestion, most parents adopted a wait and see attitude.

At the start, it was a common sight in schools to see a small group of children taking milk (usually in porridge), while

the rest of the children, whose parents had not contributed funds, watched with hungry eyes. School encouragement and peer pressure from the children eventually resulted in an increase in the number of children having parent-provided milk at school. Today, parents in 315 public schools in Ankole are contributing funds to provide milk for their children.

There is no denying that getting parents to contribute funds towards school feeding, especially where lack at home is glaring, is a challenge. However, with determination, commitment and the support of all actors, it is possible. In one school in Ankole, the headmaster established a parents' committee, visiting all homes that did not (yet) pay. In some cases, the gentle nudge of the visit was sufficient to get parents to pay, while in other cases, the threat of local government engagement did the trick.

Where the committee was convinced that indeed the parents or guardians of the children could not afford Shs20,000 per term required to buy the milk, the headmaster convened a village meeting, and asked the village elders to take responsibility, appointing them as 'milk ambassador' and they raised the funds to fill the gap. The achievements in Ankole demonstrates that if parents are empowered to identify locally relevant solutions, they can address the challenges they face. While milk was the go to solution for Ankole sub-region, other regions may need to look for their own contextualised solutions.

Mr Klinken is the SNV Uganda Dairy programme manager
rvanklinken@snv.org

29/35 8th Street, P.O. Box 12141
Kampala, Uganda

Phones 0312301100/1
Fax 041232369

Email editorial@ug.nationmedia.com
Registered at the GPO as a newspaper