

A piece of firewood is the meal ticket and the master on duty knows who did not bring

By Gloria Nakejubi

# No food, no school: A pupil's life in Karamoja

It is 1:00pm. It is the most regarded hour on the school timetable. It is when most children get their first and, most times, the only meal of the day in this part of the country.

This is Moroto Rainbow Primary School in Acholi Inn, one of the suburbs of Moroto municipality.

In a few minutes, the 270 pupils descend to the serving point armed with cups, plates and polythene bags.

Today's meal is boiled maize grains mixed with beans. One by one, they receive just about two handfuls of the mixture. Many walk away seemingly dissatisfied with the offer.

The gloomy faces are met by a mean look from the pupil serving today – a Primary Six girl.

As she serves, her eyes keep monitoring the queue. With each glance, the ration reduces. She does not want anyone to miss.

### Piece of wood

For those who did not bring their piece of firewood in the morning, this is the decider.

A piece of dry stick is your meal ticket. The master on duty knows who did not bring firewood. But previous experiences have taught them not to dare join the queue without a dry piece of wood – mostly tiny pieces of dry branches.

This meal is, however, not for only those who did not school. Many children report to school at the sound of the 1:00pm gong.

"There is nothing to eat in their homes. So when the bell goes, they run to get food or are pushed by their parents," Mary Immaculate Aketch, the headteacher, says.

These will, however, have to wait until those that reported to school in the morning are served. They are made to



A pupil serving food while another pupil (in white shirt) hands over a piece of firewood before getting his share

make their own queue.

After the meal, many of these run back home despite the fact that they should be in school.

### Maintaining numbers

With 737 pupils, Maxon Ojao, the headteacher of Moroto Municipal Primary School like most headteachers in the region, has to struggle to maintain the numbers. The parents, he argues, are not helpful that even contributing the sh10,000 to buy firewood is a tug of war.

### TOP TIP ✓

According to the teachers, one cannot send the pupils away for non-payment or you risk helping them to drop out

The World Food Programme (WFP) still supports most schools in Karamoja with food supplies.

Through the Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs) and school management committees (SMCs), they usually agree on how much parents can contribute so that the food is prepared.

At Moroto Rainbow Primary School, parents agreed to contribute sh5,000 per child per term. But as the headteacher explains, this money, which is meant to buy firewood, salt and pay the cooks is hardly paid.

On the other side of town is Naitakwae Primary School with an enrolment of 650 pupils. The headteacher, Joseph Korobe, just as in the other schools, struggles to turn the maize flour and beans supplied by the WFP into a meal.

"The Government says you should never use your own money for school purposes, but that is close to impossible. Parents here are poor and to them, the Government pays for everything," he says.

Last term, only one parent,

who has five children in the school brought his contribution.

According to the teachers, one cannot send the pupils away for non-payment or you risk helping them to drop out.

"Sending a child home for non-payment of these dues is like giving the parents the much-needed excuse to keep them at home," says Aketch.

### Poor school attendance

The struggle for survival keeps many pupils out of school in this part of the country. Upper primary usually suffers the most as such children get assigned different tasks at home.

According to the teachers,

the children are out in the stone quarries, brewing and selling local alcohol, engaged in petty trade and babysitting for the girls. This is either at their homes or for pay at other people's homes.

John Logwe, a senior resident of Acholi Inn who has since been branded a 'friend of education' because of keeping parents on their toes for not taking their children to school, attributes the poor school attendance and retention to poverty.

"A parent will weigh between buying a book and food for the rest of family. You can guess what the choice will be. So education is not yet a priority," he says.

### HAPPY KITCHEN

Mary Immaculate Aketch, the headteacher of Moroto Rainbow Primary School, says pupils come to school because they hope to find food. Children move from one school to another, depending on the availability of food.

A happy kitchen, as Markson Ojao, the headteacher of the nearby Moroto Municipal Primary School describes, is manifested in the school's enrolment. "These children are like tourists. If your kitchen has smoke all the time then the number will skyrocket. The day the fire goes out, you will see empty classes," he says.



Immaculate Aketch

### Two meals a day

According to World Food Programme data, 109,000 children are currently benefiting from the school meals programme in Karamoja region. These are given at least two meals a day. WFP set out to support 123,440 children in 282 primary schools in Karamoja at an annual cost of \$11.26 (about sh40,581) per child annually.

"WFP will provide 100% of the requirements in the first three years, falling to 50% in years four and five and handover to the Government by 2020," reads the document. But with increasing controversy over the Government taking on school feeding, it remains to be seen whether the programme will be sustained when WFP pulls out.

### Statistics

According to statistics at the district education offices, Moroto has about 30,000 school going-children, but only 9,800 are in school. But even these do not attend school consistently, according to Joseph Aleper, the assistant district education officer.

Aleper explains that in the past, the district passed by-laws on school attendance with little success.

"We are planning to come up with an ordinance whereby if a parent is found not to have sent their children to school, they will be fined. We are considering having parents work in school farms so that the children can have what to eat," he said.

### Barazas

The district, Aleper says, has also adopted the use of barazas to sensitise the community on the value of education.

"This is an issue of mindset. The community still has a negative attitude towards education and when it comes to girls, it is worse. Girls are perceived as a source of wealth," he says.

According to WFP, Ugandans on average consume 400 kilocalories, less than what they need every day.

The situation is worse in schools as one in three school children have no food to eat during the school day.

"In the northern and eastern regions, particularly Karamoja, scarcity of rain can exacerbate food insecurity, forcing families to sell off their assets to take their children out of school or resort to environmentally harming practices to secure food," the UN agency states.



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