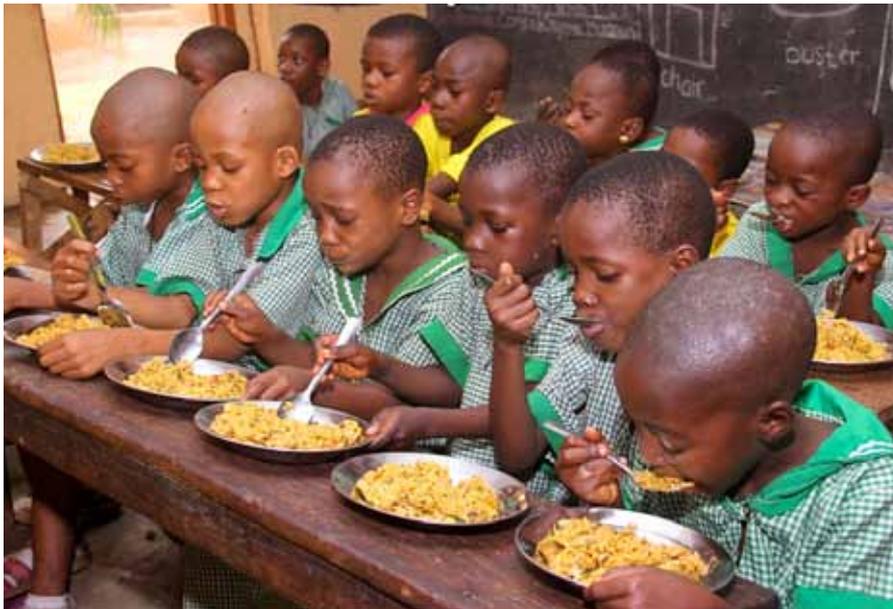


# An innovative approach to school feeding programmes

School feeding programmes bestow multiple benefits on pupils, especially in terms of improving the lives of the most vulnerable. They provide support through the provision of food, protect the nutritional status and overall health of children and boost learning by increasing access to education and the retention of pupils, particularly girls. *Report by Andy Crump:*



*Credit: Andy Crump*

School feeding operations occur worldwide, in rich and poor countries, with at least 368 million children being fed daily while they are at school. Annual programme costs total \$47-75 billion.

However, these are mostly singular vertical programmes funded from government budgets. The key question is how such programmes can be improved, sustained and made more beneficial. This is especially pertinent in low-income countries, where only 18% of schoolchildren receive free meals compared with 49% in middle-income nations.

The Pan-African Community Initiative on Education and Health (PACIEH) is a not-for-profit non-governmental organization, which was established in Nigeria in 2013 as a multi-sectorial, multifaceted, community-driven school health, education and socioeconomic development project.

PACIEH's self-help, community-managed approach is modelled on the well-proven and highly successful Community-directed intervention (CDI)

mechanism widely used to fight neglected tropical diseases in more than 160,000 remote, rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the PACIEH model, however, key community members, elders, parents of pupils and teachers are engaged in a collaborative partnership with mutually agreed roles and responsibilities. Using seed funding and guidance from PACIEH, communities are empowered to design, plan and manage school meals in a cost-effective, appropriate and sustainable manner. School authorities and pupils' parents establish a Community Fund to receive contributions from supporters and parents. The parents decide a financial commitment with each family contributing so much per week/per child and with head teachers identifying families who should be exempted.

Each project has four main components: nutrition, health, education and capacity development/provision of infrastructure. Baseline education and health data are established before a project is

launched and progress is monitored at the end of each school year.

## Nutrition/staffing

Each School-based Management Committee and Parent Teacher's Association selects parents of pupils as volunteer cooks. After nutrition training, the cooks work in teams of five (four cooks and an internal supervisor), planning and preparing nutritious meals, serving the pupils and washing the utensils.

Community participation lowers the cost of meals, while enlisting mothers as cooks is culturally acceptable, promotes community oversight, ownership and accountability and eliminates concerns about meals provided by commercial vendors. Rural communities are primary stakeholders in the partnership.

Value-added advantages include improved nutritional awareness among local cooks and interdependence between school meals and local agricultural produce, which creates a stable market for local farmers, especially smallholders, around 70% of whom are women.

After one year of regular daily feeding of 770 pupils in PACIEH's inaugural project, notable improvements were seen in key indicators, including weight-for-age, height-for-age and body mass index (BMI)-for-age, while the prevalence of underweight, stunting and thinness decreased considerably.

## Health

Baseline assessments and interventions include:

- medical examination for all and provision of free treatment for skin, ear, nose and throat (ENT) infections (687 children checked during (2013/2014) and over 70% treated). Eye examinations were initially delayed due to lack of funds, but 521 and 461 pupils were screened in 2018 and 2019 respectively. All cases of refractive errors were treated, and free spectacles provided,
- de-worming of pupils once annually with free Albendazole/Mebendazole tablets from the World Health Organization through Nigeria's

Federal Ministry of Health (687 pupils de-wormed (2013/14) and 759 of 770 pupils in 2014/2015),

- training pupils about proper hand washing before and after meals, after defaecation and after recreation.

### Education

Pre-project assessment includes school enrolment, attendance, retention and learning achievements. Previously, high primary school enrolment was often followed by poor regular attendance. School feeding programmes are one of the few education interventions that improve both school participation (enrolment, attendance, completion) and learning (scores on cognitive, language and mathematics tests).

PACIEH's feeding programmes have resulted in good improvements in learning abilities (especially in mathematics and reading) and attendance has improved, with virtually no children dropping out.

### School infrastructure & environment

In rural Nigerian schools, infrastructure is often rudimentary at best. Pre-intervention, classrooms were dilapidated, and two-thirds had insufficient seating for pupils. Lack of teachers caused some classes to be combined. Sanitation facilities, e.g. latrines and a potable drinking water supply, were generally absent.

PACIEH secured financial support from community members and private companies to employ new teachers and improve infrastructure. Safe drinking water, toilets, school kitchens with storerooms for meal preparation and hand-washing points were provided by partners from the public and private sectors.

Teachers and pupils are taught personal and environmental hygiene by a qualified health worker. Partners also purchased plates, cups and spoons for pupils, equipment for the preparation and serving of meals, and water storage tanks. In 2015, the Vitol Foundation funded the installation of six Envirofit stoves in school kitchens. The stoves drastically reduce smoke and soot, improving the health of cooks and significantly reducing cooking times.



*Credit: Andy Crump*



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### Goals

PACIEH has recorded excellent improvements in pupils' health, nutrition, school attendance, retention and learning abilities. In addition, the PACIEH model was instrumental in establishing Nigeria's nationwide National Home Grown School Feeding Programme in 2017.

School feeding projects in rural schools are an excellent cost-effective investment in human development - but only if sustained for at least 4-5 years to allow for the correction of micronutrient and other nutritional deficiencies.

Future goals include, movement toward self-sustenance and sustaina-

bility, linking meals to local agricultural practices, establishment of poultry and fish farms plus vegetable gardens in schools, as well as improving the capabilities and socioeconomic productivity of cooks and smallholders.

In Nigeria, every week, 6 million locally sourced eggs and 80 tonnes of fish are being consumed by 9.2 million schoolchildren.

Most significantly, with public sector support, PACIEH has been feeding 2-4-year olds in nursery/primary schools and it is hoped that this practice will eventually become part of the country's state-wide and national systems.