

EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMS IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

The implementation of school feeding programs has been elevated to an international concern. The challenges of Covid-19 have intensified and deepened discussions about the significance of school management teams in the implementation of school feeding programs in Nigeria and around the world. In the face of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, school feeding programs that are intended to alleviate short-term hunger, improve learners' nutrition and cognition, and transfer income to families are being cut short. However, millions of school learners in Nigeria missed out on regular school meals during the lockdown, which impacted negatively their health and well-being. Using the findings of reviewed literature from over 67 publications, the purpose of this paper was to examine the challenges that school management teams faced in providing food to learners during the pandemic and the kind of management choices that enable them to do so even during the time of an emergency. This review was carried out to enlighten developing countries, including Nigeria, regarding the significance of taking precautions and using alternative ways to implement school feeding programs during school closures by governments and non-governmental organizations, such as the World Food Program (WFP).

Introduction

The purpose of the implementation of school feeding programs in Nigeria is to provide one meal per school day to all primary school learners to improve their health and increase enrolment, retention, and completion rates. In Nigeria, these programs, which have been renamed National Home Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) and officially launched on June 9th, 2016, aim to address specific economic issues. An assessment of the NHGSFPs, implemented in Nigeria's public primary schools, has revealed that it is an effective mechanism for improving school enrolments and attendance, academic performance, and health of learners, including those that are socioeconomically vulnerable (Bosah, Obumneke-Okeke, Bosah & Onyemelukwe, 2019). Recognizing the critical importance of the NHGSFPs, the Federal Government of Nigeria has increased funding for school feeding programs in low-income states (Bosah et al., 2019). As a result, with the assistance of school management teams in each school, the provision of school meals in low-income communities has increased significantly over the last decade, translating to 45% more learners enrolled in school feeding programs between 2016 and 2020 (Issa, Willy & Mohamed, 2019).

Adekunle and Christiana (2016) argue that despite the significant impact of school feeding programs, the programs have encountered numerous challenges which prevented them from meeting all of the requirements set by the World Food Programme.

In the face of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, school feeding programs were suspended as a measure to curb the spread of the pandemic, harming a significant number of learners in developing countries in a variety of ways. For instance, Zar, Dawa, Fischer, and Castro-Rodriguez (2020) state that school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the normal distribution of school feeding operations, leaving learners in many public primary schools without this essential source of nutrition. This was a major project given that, for some learners, school is not only a place to learn, but is their only source of a hot meal (Colón-Ramos, Monge-Rojas, Weil, Olivares, Zavala, Grilo, & Duran, 2022). In Nigeria, millions of learners in public primary schools rely on food provided by school management teams. In this regard, many scholars maintain that school feeding programs, implemented with the assistance of school management teams, improve educational and nutritional outcomes, resulting in higher attendance rates and micronutrient balance for learners (Zar et al., 2020; Colón-Ramos et al., 2022). Thus, school feeding programs provide a critical, widespread safety net for vulnerable school learners through the school management teams.

Specifically, the school management teams are in charge of the quality of food distributed to public primary school learners (Awofeso & Irabor 2020). Obayelu, Obayelu, Bolarinwa, and Oyeyinka (2021) contend that the management responsibilities of school management teams include ensuring that food vendors cook according to the feeding menu, manage the feeding of vulnerable learners and monitor the quality and quantity of food distributed to learners. Particularly, school management teams must oversee school feeding programs and appoint nutrition coordinators to assist them (Federal Government Nigeria, 2016). In this paper, school management teams are head teachers, assistant head teachers, and nutritional coordinators. School management teams are also in charge of budgeting, managing funds provided by the federal government, and sourcing, purchasing, transporting, and storing food (Aduloju, Bako & Anofi, 2022). School management teams, therefore, bear a significant amount of responsibility for ensuring the effective implementation of school feeding programs, even under difficult situations, for instance, as caused by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ogunbayo & Mhlanga 2021).

Research Objective:

To highlight the challenges school management teams faced in providing food to learners during the pandemic.

Research Question:

What are the challenges that the school management teams are faced with in providing food to learners during the pandemic?

Background

The component of school health promotion is the school feeding programs. Every day, school feeding programs in Nigeria feed more than 5.1 million learners (Abay et al., 2021). The programs serve one meal per day to children in public primary schools located in low-income areas of the country. Prior to the pandemic, school management teams faced numerous challenges, including inadequate funding, monitoring and evaluation, and data collection in the implementation of school feeding programs (Aduloju et al., 2022). Actually, the pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Adeoye, Okunola, and Fakunle (2022) support the aforementioned challenges, stating in their studies that the problems experienced include delays in the delivery of meals, lack of resources, and communication breakdown between food vendors and nutritional officers. In addition to these challenges, Delbiso, Kotecho, and Asfaw (2021) have identified poor management and a lack of reporting and evaluation mechanisms. Schools were still facing these problems when the Covid-19 pandemic surfaced.

Many nations, including Nigeria, experienced school closures and disruptions in the provision of school meals during the outbreak of Covid-19. For instance, approximately 310 million school learners in 162 countries missed meals because of school closures (World Food Programme, 2020). The severely negative effects of school closures have raised awareness of the importance of school management teams in the implementation of school feeding programs. As a result of what was experienced during the outbreak of Covid-19, many nations and international bodies have modified their school feeding programs to ensure the least effect in future disasters (WFP, 2020). However, involving school management teams in changing methods of distribution for school feeding programs and aligning them with recently modified school policies was not easy. This change in school policies on school feeding programs has necessitated that the Nigerian Federal Government collaborate with the Ministries of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development to rededicate themselves to this project to protect and provide food to all learners, even if they stay at home (Amusan & Agunyai 2021).

The Ministries of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development had a constitutional and statutory duty to ensure that school feeding programs ensure access to a daily meal for all eligible learners (Amusan & Agunyai, 2021). In this regard, the order issued by the Federal Government of Nigeria required states to develop their plans to ensure that learners received their meals through school management teams.

In this regard, school management teams had to put in place specific strategies to ensure the continued feeding of learners who were learning from home during the Covid-19 pandemic (Anazonwu, Nnamani, Osadebe, Anichebe, Ezeibe, Mbah & Nzeadibe, 2021).

Literature Review

School feeding programs, which can be found across the world, are used to enhance optimal growth for which adequate nutrition is the cornerstone. School feeding programs serve as the cornerstone of healthy living, and help to prevent and reduce the risks associated with current and emerging health issues in learners (Awofeso & Irabor, 2020). Amalu, Amalu, Jack-Rabin and Amalu (2022) state that a child died every six seconds due to interconnected causes of hunger before the implementation of school feeding programs in developing countries. Furthermore, the United Nations Children's Fund (2019) confirms that a quarter of children in developing countries are overweight and are, thus, often weak and undernourished.

Empirical studies have revealed that the implementation of school feeding programs has contributed to the increase in the number of learners enrolled in primary schools, both in Nigeria and other developing countries. In Ghana, Mawela and Van den Berg (2020) concluded in their study that school feeding programs have reduced malnutrition and hunger, increased school attendance and retention, and domestic food production in the country's poorest communities. On the other hand, in Kenya, Kimwele, Ochola and Mugambi (2019) argued in their study that national home-grown school feeding programs have provided meals to learners, assisting in the improvement of academic achievement as well as local agricultural production through the purchasing of food item from smallholder farmers and local food suppliers. Similarly, Acheampong (2022) in South Africa reported that the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) has improved learning capacities for learners from primary and secondary schools in low-income communities. In support of this, the World Food Program (2019) reported that following the introduction of a school feeding program in Pakistan, enrolment, and attendance increased by 70% and 80% respectively. Adepoju and Johnson (2020) stated in their study that the HGSFP in Nigeria has helped to increase learners' enrolment, ensure that retain learners, increase school attendance, reduce dropout rates and contribute to reducing frequent changing of schools by learners.

In terms of management, governments have used school management teams to manage school feeding programs. In a study by Jacob and Musa (2021), findings revealed that school management teams believed that school feeding programs resulted in more disposable income for learners' families.

Van der Berg, Zuze, and Bridgman (2020), in their study conducted in South Africa, concluded that the involvement of school management teams had assisted with the development of an agreement on a policy and purpose that emphasizes how the program can efficiently contribute to improving education and meeting the nutritional and health needs of learners. In Mali, Borkowski, Correa, Bundy, Burbano, Hayashi, Lloyd-Evans, Neitzel, and Reuge (2021) argued that the inclusion of school management teams in decision-making processes had helped school feeding program agencies to be aware of the program's financial consequences and thus seek ways to raise additional funds. Where this happens, it is likely to ensure that the benefits of school feeding programs are enhanced while keeping costs under control.

Verguet, Limasalle, Chakrabarti, Husain, Burbano, Drake, and Bundy (2020) argued that school management teams are unaware of their responsibilities in program implementation although they are the primary source of information in schools. This suggests that school management teams may be inadequately equipped to implement school feeding programs effectively. In Nigeria, Ogunbayo (2021) reported in her study that when school feeding program agencies implemented the program, school management teams were never involved in decision-making processes. Acheampong (2022), on the other hand, noted that power was centralized and that only the government, in collaboration with school feeding program agencies, participated in decision-making processes regarding the implementation of school feeding programs. In addition, the government often issued instructions and orders without consultation with school management teams (Acheampong, 2022). In Malawi, a study by Musolo (2020) findings revealed that the lack of involvement by school management teams resulted in numerous errors and problems in the implementation of school feeding programs, including failure to implement key recommendations from the research. Musolo (2020) also pointed out that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this impacted negatively the distribution of food parcels to learners who were at home as school management teams were unfamiliar with their responsibilities, given the fact that they had been excluded from decision-making processes.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of change is used to underpin this study. The theory of change (ToC) for the school feeding programs states that farmers are encouraged to grow agricultural products and sell them to food vendors, who then use these farm products to prepare food for learners in schools, while school management teams are motivated to participate in the distribution of food to learners. As a result of the collaboration between school management teams, farmers, and food vendors in increasing access to the school feeding program, learner retention and regular school attendance are increased, which benefits all parties. For instance, the program brought in profit for the food vendors who prepare meals for learners and an increase in the number of learners attending school.

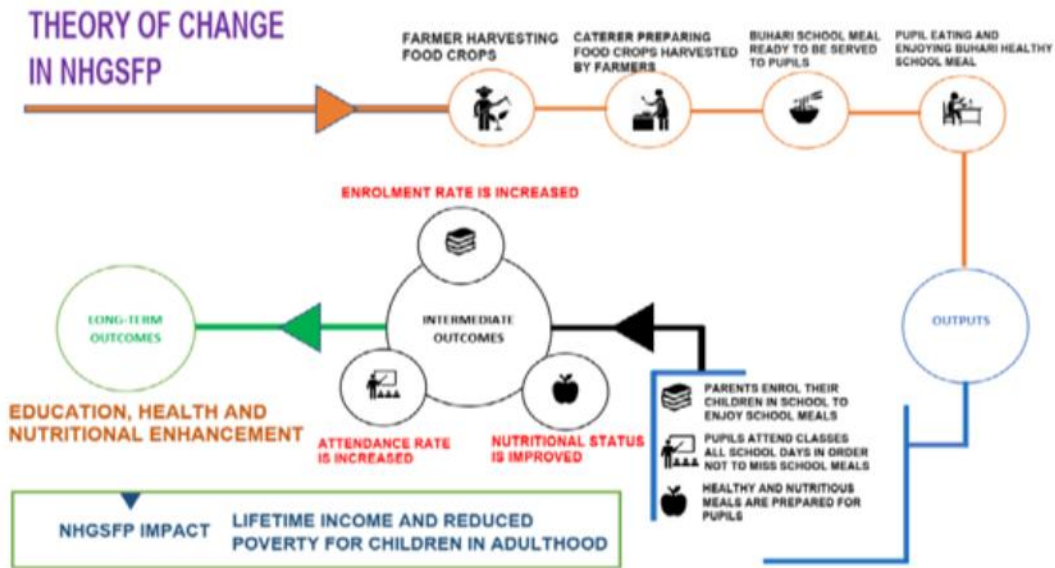


Figure 1: Theory of change

Source: Accountability lab (Saint Ville, Hickey, Rouwette, Samuels, Guariguata, Unwin & Phillip, 2022).

When income is stable and the impact of poverty on learners is decreased, the overall goal of the school feeding programs can be considered accomplished (Saint Ville et al., 2022).

Methodology

This paper is accomplished through a direct and deliberate focus on school management teams and school feeding programs in Nigeria. The intention is to determine whether or not the existing theoretical frameworks used to understand school feeding programs, as proposed by studies from advanced countries, account for the peculiarities of the Covid-19 pandemic in developing countries. To meet the needs of learners, it is crucial to understand how school management teams implement school feeding programs. Based on this understanding, this paper uses a literature review methodology. This was done by reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles regarding the implementation of school feeding programs during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first step was to identify relevant journal articles on school feeding programs.

The process of searching and selecting the articles comprised two stages. In the first stage, academic databases were chosen. Due to the comprehensive and detailed coverage of high-caliber of peer-reviewed journals in the literature regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in school feeding programs, Scopus, Taylor and Francis, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI), and Transactions on Learning Technologies (IEEE) were chosen for the literature search.

Stage two involved conducting a literature search using the following keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, school management teams, school feeding, school learners, benefits, challenges, and way forwards. The keywords were used to search through the four academic databases mentioned above. The retrieved literature was limited to journal articles written in English. In the preliminary search, one hundred (100) journal articles were discovered. Due to overlap in the coverage by the four databases of the literature on school feeding programs, 33 patents and other invalid articles were removed. 67 articles that directly related to the focus of the paper were subsequently retrieved for additional analysis.

Benefits of School Feeding Programs on School Learners Before and During Covid-19

Globally, the implementation of school feeding programs in many developed countries provides a mechanism for combating poverty and addressing issues, such as low school enrolment, attendance, and academic performance, among others (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). According to the United Nations (2020) and WFP (2019), nearly 60 million school learners in developing countries go to school hungry every day, with Africa accounting for approximately 40% of this figure. Mwendwa and Chepkonga (2019) contend that school feeding programs encourage better retention and academic performance among learners. In addition, school feeding programs also encourage poor families to send their children to school rather than keeping them at home to work or look after siblings (Bigson, Essuman, Boadu, & Otoo 2019; Mwendwa & Chepkonga 2019; WFP, 2020). For WFP (2019), a full stomach improves learners' concentration levels during lessons. In countries with low school attendance rates, the promise of at least one nutritious meal per day increases enrolment and promotes regular attendance (Wang & Fawzi 2020). Furthermore, the World Bank (2016) and WFP (2020) contend that school feeding programs can double school enrolments in the world's poorest areas in one year.

The United Nations Children's Fund (2019) has argued that the primary purpose of food distribution to learners at home during the Covid-19 pandemic was to alleviate hunger among learners. In support of this argument, Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker, and Bleich (2020) argued that school feeding programs assisted vulnerable school learners during Covid-19 by bringing food to learners, particularly girls, thus, encouraging them to return to school after the pandemic. According to Domínguez, García, Martínez, and Hernandez-Arriaga (2020), the African Union (AU) called for the formation of a coalition focusing on this vision in early 2021, which fuelled the government's decision to launch the School Feeding Coalition in United Nations Food Systems Summit in September 2021. The purpose of the School Feeding Coalition is to reintroduce school feeding to 370 million learners worldwide by 2023 and to reach an additional 73 million learners by the end of the decade, 62 million of whom are in the African continent (Ogunbayo, Aigbavboa, Thwala, Akinradewo, Ikuabe & Adekunle, 2022).

Following the launch of the School Feeding Coalition, African governments presented the Food Systems Summit with an Africa Position, specifically recognizing school feeding programs as game changers in bringing learners to school (Dunn et al., 2020). Figure 2 summarises the benefits of school feeding programs for school learners.

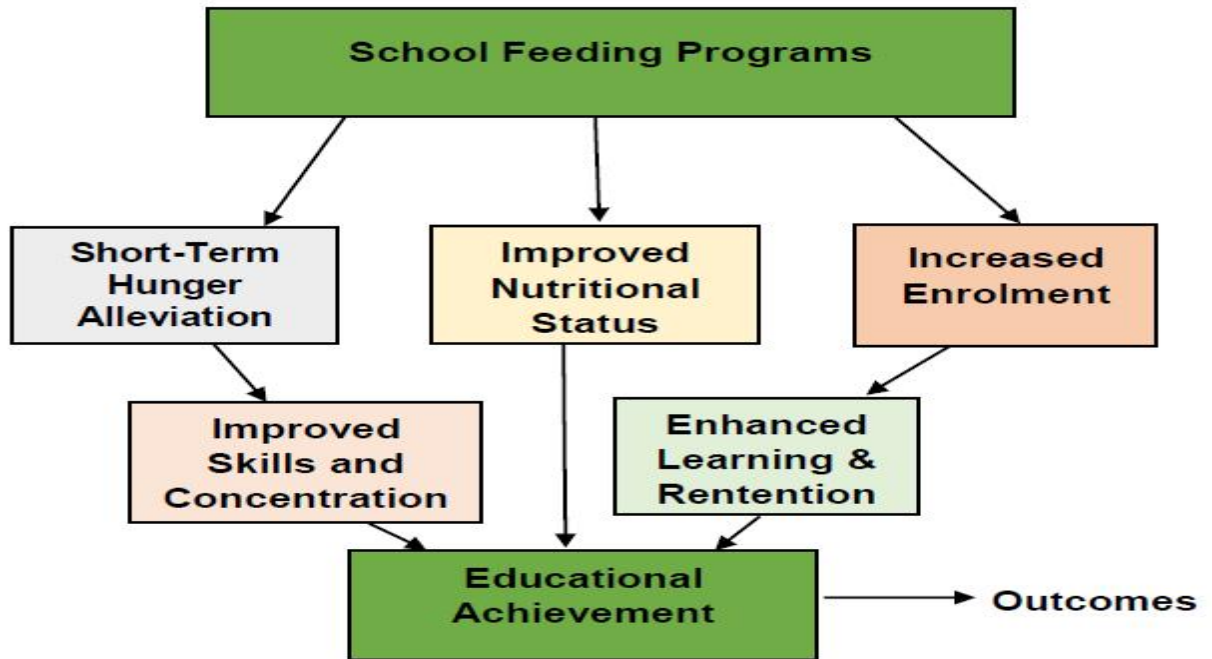


Figure 2: Benefits of School Feeding Programs for learners

Source: Authors Review (2022)

Ogunbayo and Mhlanga (2022) contend that the implementation of school feeding programs in public primary schools has benefited learners by reducing short-term hunger, improving nutritional status, increasing learner enrolments, improving concentration levels, enhancing learning and retention, and improving the achievement of educational outcomes.

Responsibilities of the School Management Teams in the Implementation of School Feeding Programs

School management teams play an important role in developing and strengthening learners' eating habits as well as determining their body weight status (Ogunbayo & Mhlanga, 2022). Aside from the contributions of the school management teams in the implementation of school-feeding programs, Ogunbayo et al. (2022) contend that school-feeding programs can provide food with higher nutrient quality than out-of-school feeding.

As indicated earlier on, according to the Ministry of Education, the responsibility of school management teams is to manage and oversee the implementation of school feeding programs and ensure the appointment of competent individuals to help them with the management of the allocated funds, including procurement, purchasing, transportation and food preparation (Barker & Russell, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the duties of school management teams became critical as they had to find new ways of getting food to learners, such as ensuring that food parcels reached eligible learners who were at home (Domínguez et al., 2020). In this regard, the Ministry of Education believed that school management teams had to ensure the implementation of school feeding programs continued during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that school management teams had to ensure the safe storage of food and manage the distribution of food parcels to eligible learners.

Experiences of School Management Teams in the Distribution of Food During the Pandemic

In Nigeria, school management teams were required to follow three feeding modalities: serving food to learners in schools, coordinating the collection of food by learners, and delivering food to eligible learners (Obayelu et al., 2021). The first option was well-known among school management teams, as they had been serving food to learners at school since the program's inception. In this regard, they had appropriate systems in place to ensure that the program ran smoothly. The effectiveness of the first option was determined by the learners' ability to attend school (WFP, 2019; Ogunbayo, 2021). However, school management teams had never implemented school feeding programs using the third option, which involved sending food to learners at home. This resulted in a range of challenges for school management teams while trying to feed learners during the pandemic.

Adeoye et al. (2022) concluded in their research, after interviewing the head of a school in Ogun state, Nigeria, that some learners could not collect food from their school because of inadequate data from the State government regarding the learners' location. For instance, the information provided on the location of learners was inaccurate, which means that the food could not reach eligible learners. In another study conducted by Amusan and Agunyai (2021) in Oyo State, Nigeria, findings revealed that only 43,678 of the expected 1.2 million school learners went to schools to collect food due to poor communication regarding the collection of food. This created a challenge for school management teams in their efforts to inform learners' parents/guardians to collect food parcels from schools. Stiegler and Bouchard (2020) observed in South Africa that the use of rotational timetables was one of the reasons food could not reach learners on days when they were at home. This challenge was largely due to mobility issues, which affected the ability of school management teams to reach out to eligible learners. Dominguez et al. (2020) confirm that in Mali, learners could not collect food parcels due to inadequate communication.

Abay, Amare, Tiberti, and Andam (2021) concluded in their study in Ghana that the poor state of the infrastructure impacted negatively on the implementation of school feeding programs by school management teams, resulting in the lack of access to food by learners during the pandemic. In addition, Abay et al. (2021) reported that school management teams could not access learners' locations due to poor road infrastructure and permanent dwelling structures for learners.

In Botswana, Anyanwu et al. (2020) reported that school management teams interviewed complained about a lack of transparency in the distribution of food parcels during the pandemic, which impacted negatively the implementation of school feeding programs. In this regard, Anyanwu et al. (2020) concluded that transparency was essential for fostering trust, support, and compliance with the protocols of food distribution programs. In addition, Anyanwu et al. (2020) argued, public awareness campaigns, nutrition education, preparedness for emergencies, and communication systems were important for ensuring the continued implementation of school feeding programs during periods of disaster.

Taking Precautions and Getting Back to School

Alternatives to education and school feeding have been implemented by governments and non-governmental organizations, including the World Food Program (WFP), in many countries, including Nigeria (WFP, 2020). For instance, e-learning was used to deliver lessons and, school feeding programs, take-home rations, cash assistance, and other substitutes were used (Eranga, 2020). The WFP, UN Children's Fund and, Food and Agriculture Organization collaborated to develop guidelines and recommendations for governments on providing services during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on nutrition for learners (WFP, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). For instance, the WFP designed a map and dashboard to track school closures globally, including the number of learners who could not benefit from school feeding programs (WFP, 2020). There is also the most recent information on government programs to assist learners who are not in school. However, well-designed coping mechanisms are expensive and solutions ineffective. WFP data shows that 48% of the 17 million learners who were beneficiaries of school feeding programs before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic are currently being reached by current preventative measures in 78 countries (WFP, 2020).

There is an urgent need for remediation mechanisms to enable countries to safely ensure that all their learners are back in schools, given the fact that COVID-19 containment efforts are anticipated to last for some years (Amusan & Agunyai 2021; Ogunbayo, 2021). The "Framework for Reopening Schools" was developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNICEF), World Bank, and World Food Program to provide guidelines for countries and enable continued implementation and provision of services (UNICEF, 2019; World Bank, 2020; WFP, 2020).

Conclusion

The need for food distribution to learners intensified during Covid-19, owing to school closures and the increase in unemployment. This paper focused on the challenges experienced by school management teams in providing food to learners during the pandemic and the kind of management required to enable them to do so even in times of emergency. In this regard, it turned out that to respond to future crises or disasters, new ways and techniques for feeding school learners will need to be devised.

However, as methods were developed in response to the developments, it became clear that the typical methods of distributing food would not be sufficient to fulfill the demands of feeding learners during a pandemic. Essentially, even when learners returned to school, the implementation of school feeding programs had to happen following specific precautions to contain the spread of Covid-19.

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