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Investing in healthy and cost-effective school menus in Ethiopia

THE PROBLEM

Globally, School Feeding Program (SFP) is aimed to provide daily snacks or meals to school-attending children and adolescents in areas where food is insecure. It may also contribute to multiple objectives, including social safety nets, education, nutrition, health, and local agriculture[1]. In terms of health and nutrition, school feeding contributes to the continuum of development by building on investments made earlier in the life course, including maternal and infant health interventions and early child development interventions[2]. Because of the food insecurity, the number of children receiving school meals globally has increased, only 27% of children in sub-Saharan Africa access a school meal and this affects learning outcomes. In 2020-2021, about 6.8%(1.6 million) school children has received school meals in Ethiopia with the support of the government and the development partners fund[3]. However, the quality of diet, dietary diversity and the cost of the locally available and home-grown diets are crucial to ensure the sustainability of SFP.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the Ethiopian Food Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs) recommendation, our analysis uses eight food groups; (1) grains, white roots, and tubers, (2) Pulses, (3) nuts and seeds, (4) milk and dairy foods, (5) meat, fish, and eggs, (6) fruits, (7) vegetables, and (8) fats and oils to cover breakfast and lunch of a student aged from 6-8 years old.

We assess the minimum cost to cover the daily meal provided to students who are beneficiaries of the school feeding program. Food group recommendations were converted from grams per day to calories per day for calculating least-cost diets.

The proposed healthy diet energy was set at 1518 Kcals/day, which accounts for two-thirds of the total daily caloric requirements of primary students (boys and girls) aged from 6-18 years who are expected to eat their breakfast and lunch from the school meal. Energy shares from all the food groups were assigned based on the FBDGs recommendations.

The other data source used in the analysis is the Ethiopian Statistical Service (ESS) monthly retail price data. The monthly retail price is collected every month in 116 markets located in 110 woredas (districts) of all regions of Ethiopia. For our analysis we use data from April 2022 to March 2023. However, data were not collected from the Tigray Regional State due to the conflict ongoing during the period covered in this analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Figure 1 shows the national average daily cost to cover two-thirds of the daily calorie requirement for primary students who are aged 6–18 years and beneficiaries of the school feeding program. This cost is calculated by using the locally available food items retail price to meet the expected daily calorie requirement for the school feeding program. The average national cost of two meals per child per day is 41.8 ETB.

Figure 2 shows the percentage share of the eight food groups recommended by the FBDGs. Animal source food appears to have a higher price in all regions than staple crops. Significant investment in the production of nutrient -dense sources is required to improve the nutritional value of the school feeding program. As for the price variation by food group per region, we understood that high share of cost of Meat, Fish, and Eggs (MFE) in all regions except Somali and Dire Dawa.

1. Kristjansson EA, Gelli A, Welch V, Greenhalgh T, Liberato S, Francis D, et al. Costs, and cost-outcome of school feeding programmes and feeding programmes for young children. Evidence and recommendations. Int J Educ Dev [Internet]. 2016;48:79–83. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.11.011.
2.World Food Program. State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022 Executive Summary. 2022
3. Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF). Global Survey of School Meal Programs Country Report, Ethiopia [Internet]. 2021. Available from: https://gcnf.org/country-reports/

Figure 1: Average daily cost of two meals per child

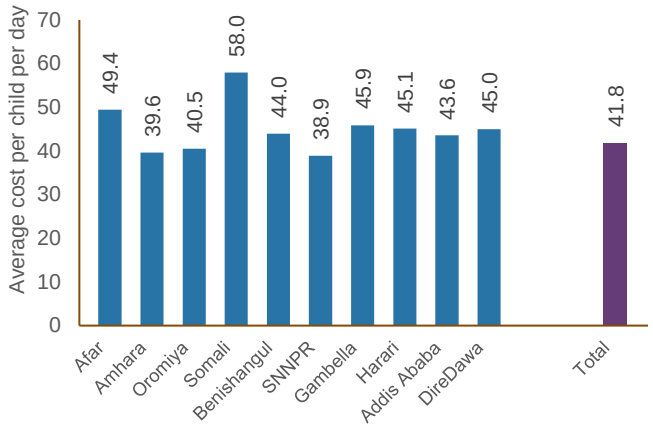
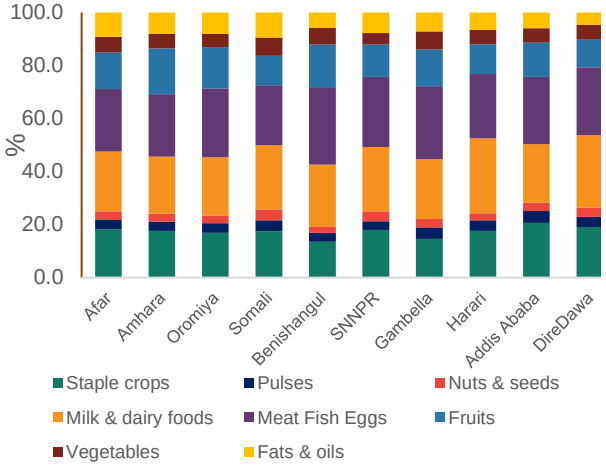


Figure 2: Cost share of food group by region (%)



ACTIONS TO FACILITATE SUSUTAINABLE SFP

Reduce costs of implementing SFPs through exploring cost-effective alternatives and budget sourcing strategies: Actions include:-

- Utilize locally available and produced food items.
- Increase regional governments contribution to financing SFP.
- Engage private sector and community during resource mobilization.

Improve livestock productivity to make animal-sourced foods more affordable. Animal Sourced Food (ASF) is rich in micronutrients and high-quality protein. Thus, consumption of ASF can play an important role in preventing child undernutrition. However, the high price share is a major concern. Improvements in the ASF value chains coupled with increased investment and attention to production can enhance the affordability of ASF.

Promote home-grown SFPs. This approach is a good opportunity to link schools with local small holder farmers and community. It promotes local. production, sense of ownership and ensure sustainability. Additionally, it strengthens economic empowerment of farmers and the local community.

Prioritize the use of locally available and least-cost foods in menu preparation, supported by guidelines, education, and training. To prepare healthy food with key nutrients, is important to have a comprehensive menu with the appropriate meal to meet the daily requirements. Besides, menu preparation should consider availability, culturally appropriateness and cost-effective local food items. Thus, dietary guidelines and experts can improve the design of such menus with the appropriate nutritional requirements.

Ensure safe handling of food in SFP. These includes adequate food safety knowledge while preparing the food. Thus, regular food safety training should be provided. Furthermore, hygiene facilities and food storeroom with adequate space and proper equipment specially for highly perishable foods such as eggs, milk, and fish should be provided to the school.