

## Including all Children in Nairobi City County School Feeding Programmes: Evidence for Policy Action



**Authors:** Stephen Mulupi<sup>1</sup>, Inviolata Njoroge<sup>1</sup>, Veronica Mwangi<sup>2</sup>, Martin Odhiambo<sup>1</sup>, Samuel Owuor<sup>2</sup>, Lilian Otiso<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>LVCT Health | <sup>2</sup>University of Nairobi

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## Executive summary

While Nairobi City County's *Dishi na County* programme serves public primary schools, 60% of Nairobi's 500,000 children attend low-fee private Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET) schools. This leaves 300,000 children, many of whom live in informal settlements, excluded from publicly subsidised school feeding.

This policy brief is based on findings from action research conducted in collaboration with LVCT Health, The University of Nairobi, and The University of Manchester through the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC). It provides evidence-based recommendations for extending school feeding programmes to vulnerable children in urban informal settlements.

### Key finding:

School feeding programmes are impactful in addressing food and nutrition insecurity among children, helping to reduce their vulnerability to hunger, malnutrition and non-communicable diseases. The *Dishi na County* model at KSh 5 per plate (USD 0.04) is the most affordable option, but expansion faces funding constraints and it is still unaffordable for some.

Many children in Nairobi's alternative schools who can't access *Dishi na County* face food insecurity. In Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET) schools, feeding programmes either do not exist, or families are unable to afford the KSh 30 (USD 0.23) per plate cost for a parent-funded school feeding programmes.

## The challenge

The majority of Nairobi's residents live in informal settlements characterised by high poverty levels, poor housing conditions, food insecurity, and high rates of stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies. This has long-term impacts on the mental and physical health, as well as social development, of children.

Alternative (APBET) schools serve the lowest-income households in informal settlements but lack adequate teaching workforce and learning infrastructure. They also lack access to the County's school feeding programme, *Dishi na County*. This exclusion exposes children from the most vulnerable households to continued food insecurity and poor nutrition outcomes and limits the development goals of the County.

## Methodology

This action research aimed at improving the health and nutrition of children in private primary schools in urban informal settlements that are not targeted by the existing school feeding programmes in Nairobi. The action research (2024-2025) was based on learning from the exploratory phase of the project (2021-2023) which offered insights into the way city-scale programmes are impacting at the local level.

Working in collaboration with selected schools and relevant state and non-state stakeholders, including community members, we sought to co-create an intervention to mainstream sustainable and affordable healthy diets through feeding programmes in alternative schools, based on learning from existing programmes.

**Participatory action research approach:** We applied a participatory action research approach to enable the co-design of interventions with affected community members through an iterative learning process, thereby increasing the sustainability of the solutions. We collaborated closely with stakeholders, including County Departments of Health and Education, Slum Dwellers International-Kenya, and community members.

**Desk review:** An analysis of school feeding programmes and policy documents in Nairobi from 2000-2025.

**Assessment of existing school feeding models:** Nine schools (four public and five APBET) were assessed in the informal settlements of Mathare (n=3), Viwandani (n=3), Korogocho (n=1), Dagoretti (n=1), and Githogoro (n=1). The assessment involved 11 key informant interviews with County officials, political representatives, and programme officials; 27 interviews with teachers and catering staff; and eight focus group discussions with parents.

**Co-design of a school feeding programme:** Four schools without a feeding programme were selected (two in Viwandani, two in Mathare) for the implementation stage. Four co-researchers (teachers from the implementation schools) participated in all research aspects.

## Key findings

### 1. Cost per plate of different models varied significantly

Model	Description	Cost per plate	Schools
<b>Dishi na County</b>	Public-private partnership with Food4Education. Centralised kitchens with daily distribution. Heavily subsidised.	KSh 5 (USD 0.04)	3
<b>Food Banking</b>	Redistribution of surplus foods from farmers and supermarkets at discounted costs.	KSh 50 (USD 0.40)	2
<b>School Produced</b>	Fully parent-sustained, prepared on-site.	KSh 30 (USD 0.23) average	4

### 2. Affordability is a key constraint

Parents of children in the four implementation schools identified **KSh 20 (USD 0.16) per plate as the affordability threshold**. Any cost above this exposes children to exclusion from meals, in contexts where many households live below USD 1 per day.

### 3. Positive impacts of school feeding programmes

**100% of informants** in all 11 schools reported that school feeding programmes:

- Improve children's wellbeing and social development
- Enhance school enrolment and retention
- Increase children's energy and classroom participation
- Improve eating habits through peer influence
- Provide social safeguards against harmful substances (eg drugs disguised as food)
- Free parents' time for income-earning activities

#### 4. Good food quality standards

All schools assessed demonstrated clean, hygienic environments for food handling. The variety of foods provided was similar across models, including rice, legumes (beans and green grams), vegetables and *ugali* (maize flour staple). Some models occasionally included beef, eggs and *chapati* (wheat flour flatbread).

Children's preferences were clear: they favoured meat, rice, and beans, while disliking *ugali*, cabbage and *githeri* (maize and beans mixture). *Githeri* was discontinued in the four study schools due to poor acceptance.

#### 5. Food portions varied

Portion sizes varied significantly based on payment reliability and food availability. With *Dishi na County*, where subsidies are substantial and supply chains are reliable, children received adequate portions and often took surplus food home to share with siblings. However, schools depending on parent payments faced chronic challenges with small portions, creating dissatisfaction among both children and parents.

#### 6. There are access and exclusion challenges

All models offered flexible payment arrangements to ease the burden on parents. However, significant access challenges persist:

- Children who have not paid are sometimes excluded from meals
- Only one school maintained a policy of providing food to all children regardless of payment status
- Some schools reduce portion sizes considerably when trying to serve all children despite payment defaults
- Parents sometimes offer services to schools (cleaning, cooking) when unable to pay in cash
- Electronic subscription systems (used only in the *Dishi na County* model) allow payment tracking but still result in exclusion when families cannot afford fees

#### 7. Food supply and timing

The centralised food preparation and delivery of *Dishi na County* ensured food arrived hot during lunch breaks, minimising disruption to learning. Schools preparing food on-site faced multiple challenges including coordination of cooking schedules with class times, supply chain uncertainties affecting menu planning and occasional delays in food availability.

#### 8. Infrastructure constraints

Schools preparing food on-site face critical infrastructure gaps such as:

- High water costs with unreliable supply, yet large volumes needed for food preparation
- Reliance on expensive firewood as primary fuel
- Lack of improved cooking stoves (*jikos*), leading to inefficient fuel use
- Respiratory health risks for catering staff due to smoke exposure
- Limited storage facilities for ingredients

## Policy recommendations

### 1. Extend *Dishi na County* to informal schools

**Priority action:** Allocate additional budgetary resources to extend the *Dishi na County* model to children in APBET schools.

**Rationale:**

- Proven most affordable model at KSh 5 per plate
- Economies of scale through centralised kitchens
- Minimal disruption to learning (food prepared off-site)
- Strong quality control and hygiene standards

**Implementation considerations:**

- Identify and register eligible APBET schools in informal settlements
- Establish verification mechanisms for student enrolment
- Develop phased rollout plan starting with highest-need areas

### 2. Secure sustainable financing

**Challenge:** Reports of national budget cuts to school feeding programmes in 2025 threaten programme sustainability.

**Actions required:**

- Protect *Dishi na County* budget allocations at County level
- Explore diversified funding sources, including:
  - Development partners focused on child nutrition
  - Private sector partnerships
  - Innovative financing mechanisms (eg social bonds)
- Develop contingency plans for donor financing reductions

### 3. Integrate children's preferences into menu planning

**Evidence:** Children showed clear preferences (liked meat, rice, beans; disliked *ugali*, cabbage and *githeri*).

**Recommendation:**

- Establish feedback mechanisms to capture children's food preferences
- Involve children and parents in menu co-design, particularly for school-produced models
- Balance preferences with nutritional requirements and cultural appropriateness

### 4. Address infrastructure gaps for on-site food preparation

**Access to water:**

- Partner with Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company to provide subsidised water connections
- Explore water storage solutions
- Include water costs in programme budgets

Clean cooking:

- Provide improved cooking stoves (improved *jikos*) to reduce fuel costs and health risks
- Explore renewable energy options (eg biogas, solar)
- Train catering staff on efficient fuel use

## 5. Develop flexible payment and inclusion policies

**Critical policy:** No child should be excluded from meals due to inability to pay.

**Recommended approaches:**

- Credit systems allowing families to pay when able
- Community support funds for most vulnerable families
- In-kind contributions (parent services) for families facing temporary hardship
- Bulk purchasing arrangements, to reduce per-plate costs
- Electronic subscription model (as in *Dishi na County*) to track payments

## 6. Explore food value chain partnerships

**Opportunity:** The Food Banking model demonstrates potential to reduce food waste while feeding children.

**Actions:**

- Map surplus food sources (farmers, supermarkets, hotels, event venues). Harness surpluses from the food value chain can enhance all school feeding models
- Develop partnerships with food producers and distributors
- Create efficient logistics for food collection and distribution
- Address food safety and quality standards for surplus food
- Scale successful elements of Food Banking model

## 7. Expand research on co-benefits

Beyond nutrition: School feeding programmes provide:

- Social protection against harmful exposures such as drugs and violence
- Gender equity (reduced domestic burden on girls)
- Economic benefits (parental productivity) and long-term benefits of education
- Community development opportunities

**Recommendation:** Commission research on the full economic and social return on investment for school feeding programmes to strengthen advocacy for expanded funding.

## Costing and fiscal implications

Model	Cost per plate	Annual cost paid by parents (200 school days)
<i>Dishi na County</i>	KSh 5 (USD 0.04)	KSh 1,000 (USD 8)
<b>Affordability Threshold*</b>	KSh 20 (USD 0.16)	KSh 4,000 (USD 32)
<b>Food Banking</b>	KSh 50 (USD 0.40)	KSh 6,000 (USD 48)
<b>School Produced</b>	KSh 30 (USD 0.23) average	KSh 10,000 (USD 80)

\*affordable threshold refers to the amount majority of the parents were willing to pay for food

### Investment required

An estimated 300,000 children in informal schools are currently excluded from *Dishi na County*.

Many parents are willing to pay up to KSh 20/plate, significantly more than the current KSh 5 contribution.

Contributions at this level could generate KSh 1.2 billion (USD 9.6 million) annually, providing the funding needed to expand *Dishi na County* into informal schools.

### Expected impact

Extending school feeding programmes to children in informal settlements will deliver:

- Improved nutrition: Better anthropometric outcomes (height, weight) and nutritional adequacy for 300,000 currently excluded children.
- Enhanced educational outcomes: Increased school attendance, enrolment, retention and improved classroom participation and concentration.
- Greater equity: Universal meal access regardless of ability to pay, eliminating exclusion of the most vulnerable children.
- Economic benefits: Increased parental productivity as caregivers can focus on income-earning activities rather than meal preparation.
- Health and safety co-benefits: Reduced exposure to harmful substances, improved food safety standards, and better health outcomes for children in informal settlements.



## Conclusion

Nairobi City County has demonstrated leadership through the *Dishi na County* programme, but 300,000 of the most vulnerable children remain excluded. This research provides clear evidence that:

1. The *Dishi na County* model is the most affordable and scalable option
2. Families in informal settlements cannot afford more than KSh 20 per plate
3. School feeding programmes deliver multiple co-benefits beyond nutrition
4. Extension to informal schools is both necessary and feasible with appropriate investment

**The time to act is now.** With budget pressures mounting and donor financing uncertain, protecting and expanding investment in child nutrition is both a moral imperative and a strategic investment in Nairobi's future workforce and social stability.

## Contact information

### LVCT Health:

Lilian Otiso, Executive Director  
Email: [director@lvcthealth.org](mailto:director@lvcthealth.org) [www.lvcthealth.org](http://www.lvcthealth.org)

### University of Nairobi:

Prof. Samuel Owuor, Department of Geography, Population and Environmental Studies  
Email: [samowuor@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:samowuor@uonbi.ac.ke)

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