

Research Application Summary

Empowering primary school children to produce food to mitigate short-term hunger through school gardening: The case of Universal primary schools in Kamuli and Soroti Districts, Uganda

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Abstract

Short-term hunger caused by inability of parents to pay for or pack lunch for their children threatens success of Universal Primary Education in Uganda. School gardening if properly introduced offers a sustainable solution that empowers the pupils to gain life skills in agriculture and to produce food for school feeding programme. Agricultural clubs inspire and motivate pupils to practice agriculture when they own the enterprises. The clubs also enable pupils to learn other skills associated with self-organisation, leadership and teamwork. Sustainability of school gardening, however, requires commitment and joint engagement of researchers, extension workers, school administration, parents and local leadership.

Key words: Learning, school gardening, short-term hunger, UPE schools

Résumé

La faim à court terme causée par l'incapacité des parents à payer le déjeuner ou à l'emballer pour leurs enfants constitue un danger pour la réussite dans l'Enseignement Primaire Universelle (EPU) en Ouganda. Les jardins scolaires, s'ils sont correctement mis en place, offrent une solution durable qui permet aux élèves d'acquérir des aptitudes vitales dans l'agriculture et de produire à manger pour le programme d'alimentation scolaire. Les clubs agricoles inspirent et motivent les élèves à pratiquer l'agriculture quand ils ont des initiatives propres. Ces clubs permettent aussi aux élèves d'acquérir d'autres aptitudes liées à l'auto-organisation, au leadership et au travail d'équipe. Cependant, la durabilité de jardinage à l'école exige la responsabilité et l'engagement conjoint des chercheurs, des vulgarisateurs, de l'administration scolaire, des parents et des dirigeants locaux.

Mots clés: La faim à court terme, le jardinage à l'école, l'apprentissage, les écoles de l'EPU

Background

Uganda's launch of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 was a landmark towards meeting the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No.2 of ensuring that all children complete primary education. Retention of the pupils in schools is however threatened by short-term hunger caused by the inability of the parents to pay for lunch for their children. Under the UPE programme, the Government meets the cost of primary education and the parents are left with the responsibility of providing uniforms, scholarstic materials and lunch for their children. The mandatory school feeding programme for day scholars in UPE schools has been scraped as the cost of feeding became prohibitive due to high poverty levels especially in the rural communities. The policy on school feeding is that parents who can afford to pay are allowed to make feeding arrangements with the school management, and that pupils whose parents cannot afford the cost of a school meal provide food for their children to carry to school (Uganda Budget, 2007/2008). In view of the fact that many parts of Eastern Uganda experience unstable food security situation, the children may not be able to have enough food at their homes and as Bugembe (2009) argued, it is unthinkable that the poor parents can be able to pack food for their children to eat while at school.

Short-term hunger - a situation caused by children not having lunch at school is a major constraint to retention of children in rural UPE schools in Eastern Uganda. This is, inspite of the fact the schools teach agriculture (theoretically) and many rural schools have land that can be used to establish school gardens as a laboratory for teaching practical agriculture and to produce food for the children. The potential of school gardening in providing life skills in agriculture and as a strategy for mitigating short-term hunger in rural UPE schools has not been exploited.

Literature Summary

Education is the society's main instrument for reproducing itself and can be a key ingredient for social change including poverty eradication (Birdsall *et al.*, 2005). Basic education such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) is one step towards improving the welfare of the poor who would otherwise not afford to invest into education as a long-term strategy to curb poverty. Indeed, achieving universal primary education is MDG No. 2 of the United Nations targeting to have all children in the world attain a full course of primary education by 2015 (UN, 2000). In pursuance of MDG targets, the Uganda Government moved fast to implement UPE in 1997 which tripled enrollment within the first two years (Ndeezi, 2000). Retention of the pupils

in school is however constrained by short-term hunger among other things. Less than 30% of the children who enroll in primary one complete primary seven (Kibwika *et al.*, 2010). The World Declaration on Education for All identifies poor health and nutrition as one of the crucial underlying factors influencing low enrollment, absenteeism, poor classroom performance and school dropouts in many African countries (UNESCO, 2002; WFP, 2006).

Whereas the majority of the school drop-out resort to agriculture as a source of livelihood, the teaching of agriculture remains rather theoretical. In view of the high UPE drop-out rates of nearly 80% (Murphy, 2003) the new Primary School Agriculture curriculum seeks to vocationalize primary education to enable the pupils gain some transferable life skills in agriculture but this is still far from being realized. A school garden is considered as an out-door laboratory teaching and learning of agriculture experientially and it should have experimental plots; nursery site; a livestock section; a crop museum; orchard and tree plantation (NCDC, 2000). Several scholars argue that that primary school pupils can effectively disseminate agricultural information and practices in the community (Miiro and Orum, 2007; Kibwika *et al.*, 2010) but they also observe that this potential has not been fully exploited.

Study Description

With the support of a research grant from the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) this study seeks to revitalize school gardening as a laboratory for experiential learning of agriculture in primary schools to mitigate short-term hunger in rural UPE schools in Uganda. The study employs a case study methodology applied in action research framework to engage with pupils organized in agricultural clubs and teachers in two schools in Kamuli and Soroti districts. Qualitative case study design is suitable for understanding relationships between the context, mechanism and outcome of an intervention like school gardening. The action research framework allows mutual learning through practice while posing critical and reflective questions on the action.

Kamuli and Soroti districts are selected for this study because of their vulnerability to hunger evidenced by recent experiences of unstable food security situation. Kamuli is one of the districts with worsening poverty levels according to the Uganda poverty status report (2005) and Soroti is one of the districts that recently experienced floods posing another dimension of vulnerability to food shortages.

Research Application

Preliminary findings of the study illustrate the gravity of short term hunger in universal primary schools as a constraint to learning and retention of pupils in Kamuli and Soroti Districts. While packing food for the pupils theoretically seems a feasible strategy it is not practical for several reasons including inadequate availability of food and difficulty in packing some food stuffs. Nearly all pupils in the schools under study experience short-term hunger which also affects their learning.

Discussions with the staff and pupils identified several effects that can be associated with short-term hunger. These include: absenteeism especially during the afternoon; reduced concentration and attention of pupils in class; physical discomfort; theft of food stuffs such as sugarcane and fruits from the neighboring community; theft of money from parents and other children; promiscuity especially among the girl children to earn money to feed themselves; indiscipline and fighting for food; and difficulty to administer the lunch for those children whose parents can pay as teachers have to roll call those who are entitled and control those who are not entitled. These effects have physical and psychological consequences leading to reduced confidence, self esteem of the pupils resulting into high rates of school dropouts.

The study demonstrates the strong interest by pupils to willingly participate in school gardening activities if it is introduced to them in a manner that presents opportunities for them. The agricultural clubs offer the social energy that forms the foundation for learning technical aspects of agriculture in a more supportive environment of work and fun. Establishment of agricultural clubs enhanced the pupils' collective interest certain agricultural enterprises and also served as platform for pupils, teachers and researchers to engage in learning of new agricultural skill in an experiential manner. Even at this early stage of the research, there is evidence that agricultural clubs can be an efficient tool for disseminating agricultural knowledge and technologies in the community (beyond the school). The pupils can influence their parents to take up new agricultural practices and the school can be a nucleus for agricultural knowledge and technologies.

In a practical way, the pupils learn the technical aspects of production as well as people-oriented skills such as leadership, trustworthiness, independence, self motivation and team work. Recognizing the relevance and potential of school gardening and agricultural clubs, the schools have involved the school

management committees early enough to enable them support mainstreaming school gardening in the respective schools from an informed position. This is a strategy for sustainability of the intervention beyond the research project.

Recommendation

The preliminary results so far lead to the following recommendations:

- Exposure and engagement of the district level administrators, education managers and community to appreciate the processes and outcomes of the school gardening as a learning laboratory and as a strategy for self-sustainability of school feeding programme. This is for purposes of scaling-up and sustainability of the initiative.
- Exposure of other researchers, funding agencies and NGOs to appreciate the value of action-oriented research in conducting research for development.
- Engage a wide range of stakeholders including the media to create awareness, advocate for and popularize the best practices of school gardening.
- Engage the school administrators, management committees and the district education officer plan for scaling-up and sustaining the positive aspects of school gardening. The schools can for example start identifying champions and promoters of school gardening and involving them to be able to guide future processes. Some of the current members (pupils) of the agricultural clubs can be Trainers of Trainers (ToTs).

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