

Public Administration **CHALLENGES:** Cases from Africa

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IMPLEMENTATION OF A NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME: THE CASE OF SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF) report of 2019, an 'alarmingly high number of children are suffering the consequences of poor diets and a food system that is failing them' (UNICEF 2019b: 1). One of the most severe consequences of inadequate diets for these children is poor school performance and attendance (Simeon, Grantham-McGregor, Callender & Wong 1995: 1882; Powell, Walker, Chang & Grantham-McGregor 1998: 873; Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams & Metz 2005: 754). This dismal state of affairs evolved despite the adoption of an Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations (2015: 13) and initiatives directed by UNICEF and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to encourage the implementation of school feeding programmes by national governments of developing countries (UNESCO 2017: 14–16).

Against the international backdrop of seemingly unsuccessful interventions in improving the nutrition conditions of school children, the South African National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) was introduced as a presidential lead programme as early as 1994 (DBE 2009: 1). This programme set out to alleviate hunger as a primary barrier to learning in the South African education sector (DBE 2013: 4). The programme was initially confined to the educational outcome of school feeding for primary school children (PSC 2008: 4–5). As this programme has been in operation in South Africa since 1994, a reasonable expectation was that South African school children's nutrition has evolved to acceptable levels. However, UNICEF found to the contrary: South African school children are 'increasingly consuming less nutritious and unhealthy food'

(UNICEF 2019b: 7). Considering the South African government's focused implementation of the NSNP to improve school children's level of nutrition, this finding does not make sense.

As the NSNP has been implemented countrywide under the direction of the National Department of Basic Education (DBE), it is reasonable to expect that a uniform approach has been followed in all nine provinces. In order to obtain a deepened understanding of the implementation of this national programme, the researchers embarked on a case study of typical South African public schools. Schools in the eThekweni region of the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa were subsequently selected as a case. Through this case study, the researchers set out to obtain a better understanding of the NSNP in the selected schools in an attempt to make sense of the possible discrepancy in the expected results and the apparent failure of the programme.

This chapter reports on the conceptualisation of national school nutrition programmes as a global phenomenon, the methodological considerations for this case study, the chronology of the NSNP and an in-depth exploration of how the NSNP is working in the selected schools. The findings are subsequently analysed to inform the attempt to make sense of the above-mentioned discrepancy. The school nutrition programme, as a global phenomenon, is discussed next.

NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

The current study departed from the assumption that school nutrition programmes are introduced to enhance the academic performance of school children in poor communities. This assumption is supported by studies that confirmed a positive correlation between a healthy diet and academic performance (Glewwe, Jacoby & King 2001; Ghosh, Rakshit & Bhattacharya 2013; Frisvold 2015; Ngussa & Mbifile 2016). These studies have been conducted in various and diverse parts of the world, such as the Philippines (Glewwe et al 2001: 346), India (Ghosh et al 2013: 57), the United States (Frisvold 2015: 91), Tanzania (Ngussa & Mbifile 2016: 127) and Cambodia (Ravesloot et al 2018: v). The theoretical assumption that 'better nourished children perform significantly better in school' (Glewwe et al 2001: 345) has been globally confirmed and there is ample evidence of the positive influence of breakfast consumption on the cognitive functioning of school children (Rampersaud et al 2005: 754; Wilson-Strydom 2012: 255; Ngussa & Mbifile 2016: 127). The other side of the same coin holds that 'hunger during school may prevent children in developing countries from benefiting from education' (Powell et al 1998: 873). The purpose of a school nutrition programme

is therefore to secure a healthy diet for underprivileged school children in order for them to benefit fully from education.

Malnutrition among children is evidently a global challenge (UNICEF 2019a: 3). Therefore, Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims at ending all forms of malnutrition by the end of 2030 (United Nations 2015: Goal 2), while Goal 4 stipulates removing all forms of disparity in education, especially for children in vulnerable situations (United Nations 2015: Goal 4). Malnutrition is such a disparity. It is also noteworthy that malnutrition, as a vulnerable situation for school children, is not confined to poor countries only (Rodgers & Milewska 2007: 75–95). The study by Rodgers and Milewska (2007: 75–95) confirmed that school children’s malnutrition is also a key concern in industrialised and wealthy countries such as the United States. For this reason, the US government has established comprehensive interventions to ensure children’s nourishment with a view to optimising their school performance (Rodgers & Milewska 2007: 88).

More than 80% of the 195 countries have school feeding programmes (World Bank Group 2018: 1) providing meals to children in poor areas in order to improve their nutrition and educational outcomes (World Bank Group 2018: 80). Moreover, evaluation studies of school nutrition programmes have confirmed that these programmes improve children’s consumption of nutritious food with a subsequent positive impact on their academic performance (Frisvold 2015: 91; Colley, Myer, Seabrook & Gilliland 2019: 84; Turner & Calvert 2019: 980). From the above, it can be deduced that school feeding programmes are not primarily aimed at the reduction of poverty, but at the improvement of the level of nutrition of especially poor school children, as improving the level of nutrition has been shown to be an antecedent to improved academic performance among school children.

The UNICEF finding that South African school children are increasingly consuming less nutritious and less healthy food (2019b: 7), irrespective of the existence of a national school feeding programme in South Africa since 1994, implies that the NSNP has failed in its attempt to improve the conditions (healthy nutrition) necessary for increased school performance. In order to make sense of this discrepancy between the expected influence of the programme and the assessment by UNICEF, this study set out to explore this programme as it has been implemented in South Africa.

The study of the phenomenon ‘national school nutrition programme’ was approached from diverse theoretical perspectives, such as Sen’s capability theory of wellbeing (Streak 2011: 37), the theory of narrative rationality (Zenkin 2012: 90), the theory of change (DPME 2016; Devereux et al 2018), the new public management theory (Govender 2016: 45) and Maslow’s motivation theory (Ngussa

& Mbifile 2016: 128). As UNICEF's findings regarding the state of nutrition of South African school children suggest a failure in policy implementation, the theory of policy implementation failure seems to be a reasonable sense-making starting point (Howlett, Ramesh & Wu 2015; Dunlop 2016). Policy implementation failure also implies failure 'to deal with implementation problems including lack of funding, legitimacy issues, principle-agent problems, oversight failures and others' (Howlett et al 2015: 213). To understand the possible contributions to the implementation failure of the NSNP, this study approached the selected case with the following questions:

- What are the main characteristics of the NSNP in South Africa?
- What are the enabling antecedents (eg legislation, policies, procedures, finance, staffing and oversight) for the implementation of the NSNP?
- What are the consequences of the NSNPs' implementation for the nutritional conditions necessary to ensure the optimal academic performance of school children?

The methodological considerations for finding answers to these questions are discussed next.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The 'school nutrition programme' has been identified in the previous section as a concept globally referring to government interventions to improve the nutritional conditions necessary for school children's optimal academic performance. For the purpose of this study, an intervention is regarded as an act to interfere with the outcome of a course, condition or process (Wessels & Thani 2014: 170). The NSNP is a South African instance of this phenomenon. Whereas the UNICEF findings regarding increased malnutrition among South African school children suggest that these children may not have responded as expected to the NSNP, the current study set out to make sense of this discrepancy by exploring:

- the main characteristics of the NSNP in South Africa;
- the influence of the enabling antecedents (eg legislation, policies, procedures, finance, staffing and oversight) of the NSNP;
- the consequences (eg key achievements and failures) resulting from the implementation of the NSNP in the selected schools; and
- the possible nutritional impact of the NSNP in the selected schools.

This exploratory study used two broad categories of source, namely, documents and human participants. Official documents were read for an understanding of

the regulatory context of the NSNP, while the lived experiences and orientations of human participants were explored regarding the influence of the enabling antecedents and consequences of the implementation of the NSNP. The consequences specifically include the NSNP's possible nutritional impact. The involvement of implementation-level human participants in the sense-making process warranted the choice of a case study approach to focus on a small selection of typical schools that were benefitting from the NSNP.

For this reason, a record of all the schools in KwaZulu-Natal that access the NSNP was obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education's district officer. The schools were chosen based on their geographical locations, being not further than 2–15 km away from each other. Four primary schools in the eThekweni region of KwaZulu-Natal were selected to serve collectively as typical cases for the implementation of the NSNP. Two of the schools accommodated primarily children from informal settlements, while the learners of the other two schools were from formal suburbs (Govender 2016: 102). These schools are:

- the Palmiet Primary School (480 learners) serving the nearby Palmiet Road and Quarry Road informal settlements;
- the Clareville Primary School (352 learners), with the Kennedy Road informal settlement approximately one kilometre away from the school;
- the Dr Macken Mistry Primary School (445 learners) located in Newlands East; and
- the Parkvale Primary School (450 learners) in Newlands West.

The study did not involve any learners as participants. The human participants in this study were randomly selected to include two external key stakeholders from the provincial DoE and four school principals, 70 teachers and 33 members of the governing bodies of the selected schools (SGBs). The teacher category of participants included school coordinators and teacher assistants (Govender 2016: 115); more than 80% of them had had lived experiences of the NSNP for at least 18 months (Govender 2016: 114).

The participants were involved through semi-structured interviews and self-administered questionnaires. Permission to conduct the research in the selected schools were obtained from the provincial DBE while research ethics clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Office of the University of KwaZulu-Natal prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and obtained through written informed consent. The next section provides an overview of the history and main characteristics of the NSNP in South Africa.

NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME IN SOUTH AFRICA

The NSNP has proven to be closely aligned to section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which proclaims the right of every child ‘to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care and social services’ (RSA 1996c: s 28(1)(c)) as well as the right to a basic education (RSA 1996c: s 29(1)(a)). The NSNP is therefore an intervention to overcome a major obstacle to children taking up their right to basic education, namely malnutrition.

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the NSNP as the phenomenon for the case study on programme implementation instances in selected schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The overview includes the historical development, purpose, regulatory requirements, responsible institutions, funding and implementation of the programme.

The history of the NSNP in South Africa commenced shortly after the birth of the democratic dispensation in 1994. On 14 May 1994, President Nelson Mandela announced as part of his first State of the Nation Address to the Houses of Parliament that ‘a nutritional feeding scheme will be implemented in every primary school where such need is established’ (Mandela 1994). This announcement was followed by the publication of the White Paper on Reconstruction and Development which, among other provisions, provided for a primary school nutrition scheme to ‘contribute to the improvement of education quality by enhancing primary school pupils’ learning capacity, school attendance and punctuality and contribute to general health development by alleviating hunger’ (RSA 1994b: 46). This scheme was implemented in September 1994 as the joint responsibility of the national Ministries of Education and Health (RSA 1994b: 46, 62, 65). In its early stages, this programme was regarded as a health-promotion initiative and the Department of Health (DoH) took the lead in coordinating the programme (Public Service Commission 2008: 4). The Primary School Nutrition Scheme (PSNS) was renamed in April 1995 to become the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) (PSC 2008: 2). The adoption of the Constitution in 1996 provided an authoritative confirmation that basic nutrition is an essential right for every child (RSA 1996c: s 28). The realisation of this basic right commenced with the first implementation steps towards meeting the aims of the PSNP (PSC 2008: 4), which are discussed below.

While the PSNP was conceived even before the finalisation of the Constitution of 1996, the aims of this programme constituted definite steps towards the realisation of the constitutional rights enshrined in section 28 (RSA 1996c: s 28). Accordingly, the PSNP was established primarily to enhance the educational outcomes of quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools’ primary school children by providing them with an early morning snack; the programme was extended in October 2008

to include secondary school children (PSC 2008: 4; DBE 2009: 1). Irrespective of the criteria of the NSNP mentioned above, some of the research participants raised concerns about the programme's failure to identify certain needy schools that require access to the programme (Govender 2016: 169). This anomaly has been attributed to the quintile ranking's use of school structures and buildings as criteria rather than the poverty index of the community and school. But this perception of the quintile criteria is incorrect because the quintile ranking is used as an indication of the poverty score of a school and is based on census data about the household income dependency ratio (ie unemployment rate) and the level of education (ie literacy rate) of a specific community (Van Dyk & White 2019: S2). However, research has shown that this ranking system does have flaws and may "not always capture the poverty of the learner community accurately" (Van Dyk & White 2019: S2). It is therefore possible for children who are eligible for this programme to be excluded due to the quintile status of their schools.

The other aims of the NSNP do not relate to education but to health improvement and development initiatives for combatting poverty (PSC 2008: 4). This explains why the national DoH was the first custodian of this programme. As the primary focus of this programme has gradually shifted to become more educational, the most appropriate institutional setting for the NSNP has been shown to be the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (DPME 2016: I).

The defining characteristics of this programme are its distinct nature, primary focus, objectives and implementation model. The NSNP is a typical example of an *intervention* to resolve a policy problem (see May 2015: 278; Wessels & Naidoo 2019: 161). The primary focus of the programme was to improve the educational outcome and educational experience of the poorest of learners by overcoming one of the major obstacles they face, namely their *nutritional status* (DBE 2013: 10; DPME 2016: I). The objectives of this programme became explicitly *educational*: to contribute to enhanced learning through the provision of daily nutritious meals, encourage healthy lifestyles through nutrition education in schools and promote sustainable food production initiatives in schools (DBE 2013: 10; DPME 2016). A third attribute of the NSNP is its *national scope*, while its fourth attribute is that of *school-level implementation* (DPME 2016: I). The NSNP in South Africa, the phenomenon for this study, is therefore characterised by its interventionist nature, educational focus and objectives, national policy scope and grassroots-level of implementation. The success of this programme, however, is determined by a variety of antecedents that need to be in place in order for it to succeed.

ENABLING ANTECEDENTS

While the previous section provided an overview of the defining attributes of this programme, this section explores those enabling antecedents which need to be in place for the NSNP to realise the above-mentioned constitutional imperatives. The following antecedents have been identified as necessary to the success of the NSNP: constitutional and legislative mandates, policy directives, institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement, budget allocations, and monitoring and evaluation.

Constitutional foundation

As stated earlier in this chapter, the core enabling foundation of the NSNP is the Constitution of 1996. Proclaiming access to sufficient food, basic nutrition and basic education to children as a right (RSA 1996c: ss 27(1)(b), 28(1)(c) and 29(1)(a)) constitutes an imperative which serves as a fundamental enabling condition for the NSNP. In addition to these two constitutional rights, the NSNP is an intervention that requires goods and services to be procured in order to provide the necessary nutrition to poor children. The constitution also requires that procurement be done in a system 'which is fair, equitable, transparent, competitive and cost-effective' (RSA 1996c: s 217(1)). It is evident that without this sound constitutional antecedent, the NSNP would probably not have been implemented with the same urgency and administrative fairness as has been the case. Moreover, a rich and diverse collection of enabling and authorising legislation exists as a second category of antecedents for the NSNP, as discussed next.

Enabling and authorising legislation

A variety of enabling legislation exists for the NSNP to be executed in an officially authorised manner. The NSNP serves to support the function of the South African state to provide education. Therefore, it makes sense that the core enabling national legislation for this programme, the national Educational Policy Act 27 of 1996 (RSA 1996a) and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996a), are directly related to education – specifically school education. Through these two acts, the school system is legally constituted and provision is made for national policy for, among other provisions, education support services (RSA 1996b: s 3(4)(o)) and 'uniform norms and standards for the education of learners at schools and the organisation, governance and funding of schools throughout the Republic of South Africa' (RSA 1996c: Preamble). In addition to these two core school education acts, the antecedents of enabling legislation include the Public Service Act of 1994 (RSA 1994a), the Public Finance Management Act

1 of 1999 (RSA 1999), the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act 5 of 2000 (RSA 2000) and the Division of Revenue Act, as amended (RSA 2020). Collectively these pieces of legislation enable and authorise the NSNP as an approved and legitimate state intervention in the context of quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools in South Africa. As the NSNP is an intervention implemented by the government of the day, another antecedent for the programme is the public policy mandate and direction, which is discussed next.

Policy mandates

It is globally accepted that the success of government interventions is directly determined by the public policy process consisting of agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation (Howlett et al 2015: 213). The NSNP, as a public policy instrument, is no exception. The agenda for this policy programme has been set by the Constitution of 1996 (RSA 1996a), the first State of the Nation Address by President Nelson Mandela in 1994 (Mandela 1994) and the White Paper on Reconstruction and Development (RSA 1994b).

It is evident that the design and implementation of the NSNP as a policy programme have occurred within a complex framework of several national policies such as the National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission 2012), the Integrated Nutrition Programme (INP) (DoH 2001), the Policy framework on orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS in South Africa (DSD 2005), the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) (DoH and DBE 2012), and the Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Programme of the Department of Agriculture (DoA 2002). In addition to these policies from the functional fields of Social Development, Health and Agriculture, specific education policies also directed the NSNP: the Education White Paper 5 on early childhood education (DoE 2001a) and the Education White Paper 6 on inclusive education (DoE 2001b). This case study of the selected four schools revealed that more than 80% of the research participants agreed that the objectives of the NSNP are clearly identified, while 97% held the view that stakeholders are committed to effective policy implementation and a similar percentage agreed that the implementation is clear and transparent (Govender 2016: 129).

These diverse national policies serve as necessary conditions for the NSNP to function in a legitimate, directed and accountable manner. Directed and confined by these policies, the NSNP implements various government functions simultaneously through the involvement of several institutional role-players, which are discussed below.

Institutional arrangements and role-players

The NSNP is a multi-functional national public policy programme operating within a dense network of legislative and policy requirements through the involvement of a variety of role-players to the benefit of probably the most vulnerable part of society. It is evident that the viability of such a programme requires meticulous institutional arrangements and the involvement of supporting stakeholders. The purpose of this section is therefore to provide a brief overview of the institutional arrangements and stakeholder participation necessary for the successful and sustainable implementation of the NSNP.

The NSNP functions at four levels through the involvement of two spheres of government, the national and the provincial spheres, and in the provincial sphere, the provincial, district and school levels (DPME 2016; Govender 2016: 45). In the national sphere of government, the DoH was initially the lead custodian of this national programme. However, the operational responsibility for the NSNP was transferred to the DBE following a cabinet decision of 18 September 2002 to this effect (DBE 2009: 1). Subsequently, the DBE has been responsible for the coordination and oversight of the programme with the support of other national stakeholders, such as the Departments of Health, Social Development and Agriculture (DPME 2016: 7). Furthermore, the DBE has to monitor adherence to the myriad of legislation and policy directives by all participating institutions and stakeholders (DPME 2016: 7; RSA 2020: s 10). An equally influential national role-player is the National Treasury, which is responsible for transferring the approved additional allocations in the budget of the DBE to the public deposits account of the respective provinces (RSA 2020: ss 4(3) and 7(b); Schedule 5 Part A).

The second level of this four-tier structured institutional and stakeholder arrangements for the NSNP has a province-wide sphere of jurisdiction. The role-players in this sphere are categorised into four groups: the custodian department, the receiver and distributor of the funds, the various partners and the service-providers. As in the case of the national sphere of government, the provincial education departments (PED) serve as official custodians of this programme in their respective provinces. The PEDs are responsible for the preparation of business plans for the implementation of the NSNP in their respective provinces and the appointment, management and payment of service-providers. Each PED also monitors the compliance level in its province (DBE 2014b; DPME 2016: 6, 7). While the PEDs are mandated to procure goods and services for the NSNP (DBE 2009: 1), two distinct implementation models (centralised or decentralised) are followed to perform this mandate. Key to both these models is a new category of role-players in the NSNP: service-providers.

Service-providers are responsible for the procurement of food and the delivery

of meals to schools (DPME 2016: 1). The centralised model implies that the PEDs are responsible for the appointment of and service level agreements with service-providers (DPME 2016: 5) and this model is followed in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Western Cape. In KwaZulu-Natal, the use of SMMEs and women-owned co-operatives as service-providers is specifically encouraged. The decentralised model implies that schools are responsible for the appointment of local service-providers, who may be women-owned SMMEs, to procure and deliver food, utensils and fuel to schools (DPME 2016: 5). This model is followed in the Eastern Cape, Free State, Northern Cape and North West provinces.

The third level of implementation is that of the school districts. KwaZulu-Natal, for example, is divided into 12 districts (DBE 2009: 23; KZN DBE 2019: 79), each with a district office serving as a direct link between the PED, the schools and the public at large (KZN DBE 2019: 59). The district offices are decentralised offices of the PEDs. The key role-players at this level are the respective district offices, the district partners (government, corporate and NGOs) and the service-providers (DPME 2016: 6). The district office staff are mainly responsible for programme monitoring, supporting schools in implementing the programme and processing service-provider claims (DBE 2014c:25, 27, 32; Govender 2016: 170). The district officials who participated in this study raised concerns about challenges which may restrain the sustained success of the programme. These challenges include the interference of labour unions and politicians, disputes among community factions, the provision of poor-quality food by suppliers, the compromising effect of ineffective and inefficient service delivery on the standards and values of programme implementation, and the vested personal interests of principals and members of the SGBs (Govender 2016: 168). These aspects were mentioned as an afterthought and deserve further investigation.

While their implementation partners differ between the various provinces, they include the Tiger Brands Foundation, Kellogg's, Game, Enterprise Ilembe, and the provincial departments of Health, Agriculture and Economic Development (DPME 2016: 7). The provincial treasuries receive funds from the National Treasury and transfer them according to the budget as approved by the provincial legislature (RSA 2020: ss 10 and 30).

The fourth and decisive level of implementation of the NSNP is the school level. Countrywide, more than 20 000 schools benefitted from the NSNP during the 2018–2019 financial year (DBE 2019: 162). At the school level, the principals, school management teams and school co-ordinators are mainly responsible for implementing the NSNP by managing and paying service-providers, monitoring whether services are rendered according to service level agreements and food safety standards, and submitting regular reports to the district offices (DBE 2019: 142).

The implementation partners at this level consist of, among other groups, volunteer food handlers and members of the school communities (DBE 2017: 39). The study in the selected schools revealed that these implementation partners are usually parents earning a minimal stipend of ZAR840.00 per month for their assistance. In the selected schools, the study identified a need for minimum norms and standards for food-handlers to ensure an effective and efficient procurement process (Govender 2016: 164).

The research in the four selected schools in KwaZulu-Natal suggests a preference for the decentralised model (as opposed to the centralised model applied in the province) as the preparation of meals on school premises was perceived as being more effective than preparation by outsourced service-providers (Govender 2016: 110). Furthermore, the late payment of service-providers by district offices posed challenges to the timely delivery of food to schools (Govender 2016: 168). This case study therefore suggests that the decentralised model that is used in other provinces is preferred by research participants. This implies a need to provide the necessary authorisation to schools to select their own service-providers to enhance accountability and responsibility in the implementation process (Govender 2016: 166).

The complex and multi-layered institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement, as discussed above, are evidently a necessary condition for the NSNP to exist. But even this antecedent will not be able to exist without the availability of the necessary funds.

Budget allocations for the NSNP

Sufficient funding is indisputably the most decisive antecedent for any policy implementation programme. The NSNP is not funded from the DBE's operational budget, but by means of conditional budget allocations to provinces (National Treasury 2005a, 2005b, 2008). The constant increase in the cost of food (National Agricultural Marketing Council 2008) resulted in the gradual increase in the amount of money budgeted for the NSNP and allocated by the national government to provincial governments (National Treasury 2005a, 2005b, 2008).

While the initial focus of the NSNP was on children in primary schools, the Parliamentary Fiscal and Financial Committee sanctioned the obligation to expand the NSNP to secondary schools, with a subsequent increase in the budget for the NSNP in October 2008 (DBE 2009: 1). Although the conditional allocations for all nine provinces have been drastically reduced, grants that focus on social service distribution were secured, with the baselines of the NSNP being left unaltered making them equal to the 2015/2016 Medium-term Expenditure

Framework baseline (National Treasury 2015). However, in recent financial years, it has become incumbent on the government to focus on increasing the allocation in order to fulfil its constitutional mandate. Accordingly, no less than ZAR6,8 billion was allocated and spent on the NSNP during the 2018–2019 financial year (DBE 2019: 162). As this programme will not be able to function without the annual conditional budget allocations to the various provincial governments, it is reasonable to conclude that this allocation is a necessary condition for the existence of the NSNP.

Some of the schools in this case study benefit from operational and financial assistance from community members, which has resulted in the construction of a fully equipped kitchen on the school premises (Govender 2016: 167). However, the research participants in the selected schools indicated a need for more financial assistance at the schools, for instance to develop infrastructure that would secure the sustainability of the programme (Govender 2016: 152, 180). Moreover, since the allocated conditional grants are public money, it can be expected that its spending on the NSNP is continuously monitored and evaluated.

Monitoring and evaluation of programme implementation

In the light of the primary focus and objectives of the NSNP, to ensure the sustainability of the programme it is necessary to monitor and evaluate the success and the regularity of the programme in keeping its focus and meeting its objectives within the regulatory framework of the state (see AGSA 2019). The information obtained from this process is required to improve the programme constantly. To this end, two official evaluations of this programme have been conducted by the Public Service Commission in 2008 (PSC 2008) and the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation in 2016 (DPME 2016). The subsequent reports both contain findings and recommendations for improving the programme's implementation. These reports were used by the DBE to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the NSNP (DBE 2016). In addition to these instances of external monitoring and evaluation, the DBE published annually detailed reports on the implementation of the NSNP (DBE 2009, 2012, 2014c, 2014a). Furthermore, to ensure accountability for the spending of public money on this programme, the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) annually reports to parliament on the spending of conditional grants by national and provincial government departments (AGSA 2019: 53, 54, 62, 63, 67, 148, 146, 180). These reports provide ample evidence necessary for public scrutiny and for ensuring public accountability.

Enabling legislation and policy mandates were both identified as enablers of the successful implementation of the NSNP by those people directly involved in the implementation of this programme at the school level. The survey among district officials, school principals, teachers and members of SGBs revealed that 81,2% of the respondents agreed that the objectives of the NSNP are clearly identified, while 95,7% regarded the budget allocations as ‘clearly earmarked’ (Govender 2016: 128). A high commitment (97,1%) to the effective, clear and transparent implementation of these policies was present among stakeholders (Govender 2016: 128). The stakeholders agreed on the adequateness of policy documents for implementation and the imperative to work strictly in accordance with these policy mandates (Govender 2016: 177) in meeting the objectives of the programme.

This discussion set out to answer the second research question: What are the enabling antecedents for the implementation of the NSNP? Consequently, it can be deduced that the focus, objectives, effectiveness and efficiency of the NSNP are informed by several antecedents, namely, constitutional and legislative mandates, policy directives, institutional arrangements, stakeholder involvement, budget allocations, and monitoring and evaluation. It is argued that these antecedents have a direct influence on the consequences of the NSNP, which is discussed next.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE NSN’S IMPLEMENTATION: THE CASE OF SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

This section reports on a case study of selected schools to obtain a deepened understanding of the consequences of the NSNP as they are experienced by role-players in the implementation of the NSNP in the selected schools. These role-players include external key stakeholders from the provincial Department of Education and also teachers and members of the SGBs of the selected schools. The purpose of the NSNP is to ensure a healthy diet for underprivileged school children so as to enable them to benefit fully from their school education. This case study therefore explored these participants’ perceptions and lived experiences of the consequences of the programme and the possible reasons for these consequences.

Improvement of nutritional status of the poorest learners

A defining implied consequence of the NSNP is the improved nutritional status of the participating learners (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2012: 3). The UNICEF finding that South African school children are increasingly

consuming less nutritious and unhealthy food (UNICEF 2019b: 7) does not make sense considering the nature and extent of this intervention. As in the 2016 study by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME 2016: 67), this case study also did not measure the nutritional content of the food prepared as part of the NSNP in the selected schools, but it assumed that the approved provincial menus were followed. Owing to a lack of transparency in the research process which informed the UNICEF findings, it is not known whether that research process included a measurement of the nutritional content of the food prepared for the NSNP. However, the 2016 report (DPME 2016) specifically referred to South African studies which confirmed that school nutrition programmes do have a positive impact specifically on the nutritional status of ‘children who were malnourished at the outset’ (DPME 2016: 148). The current study explored the improvement of the nutritional status of the poorest learners in the selected schools through the lived experiences of those individuals who were directly involved in the implementation of this programme. This was done by investigating whether the children who have accessed the programme are indeed provided with a daily meal and whether these meals are sufficient and delivered timeously.

All the teacher-participants in this study held the view that the NSNP is successful in reducing hunger among the participating children. They also confirmed that the NSNP provided learners with a meal daily (95,8%), that these meals are sufficient for learners who access the programme (73,2%) and that the meals are provided timeously (94,3%) (Govender 2016: 122). Their experiences were shared by members of the SGBs, with 95,7% of members agreeing that the NSNP was reducing hunger among learners. Furthermore, the SGB members were satisfied that the food provided was:

- sufficient (95,8% agreed);
- according to the prescribed menu options (100%); and
- nutritious (94,7% agreed) (Govender 2016: 140).

While the 2016 evaluation of the implementation of the NSNP found that the provincial menus reflect a variety of food groups (DPME 2016: 67), the four participating school principals identified the need to add more variety to the meals. It is not clear whether they referred to the PED-approved menus or to the implementation of those menus by the service-providers. They also highlighted the importance of the timing and sequence of meals. A suggestion was made that, to increase the nutritional impact further, the meals should be provided in two stages, namely a light meal (sandwich or porridge) during the first break and a complete meal by lunchtime (Govender 2016: 131).

The lived experiences and perceptions of those individuals directly involved in the implementation of the NSNP is that the nutritional status of participating learners is improved by the programme. These experiences are authentic and valid. However, other research methods, using more refined indicators for measuring the nutritional status of learners, may shed a different light on this consequence.

AN IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR LEARNERS

The main purpose of the NSNP was shown to be an improvement of the educational experience of poor school children by simultaneously alleviating their hunger, promoting school attendance and increasing their concentration. This purpose therefore serves as the primary expected consequence of the programme. The 2016 evaluation of the NSNP confirmed that the programme contributed to improved learner concentration and ‘staying at school the whole day’ (DPME 2016: 30). In order to understand this consequence in its implementation context, it was necessary to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of the research participants at the implementation level: teachers, school principals, members of SGBs and officials from the district office. These participants provided information regarding whether the objectives of the programme have been achieved.

Teachers’ daily contact with participating learners places them in an ideal position to identify and understand learners who are facing critical poverty issues that are likely to influence their academic and social behaviour (Govender 2016: 120). It is noteworthy that this survey among teachers revealed that they experience and perceive the NSNP to meet its objectives in the selected schools. This is evident from the percentage of participating teachers who agree that the NSNP meets its objectives of reducing the hunger among learners (100%), resulting in increased learner concentration (86,4%), school attendance (92,1%), and an enhanced educational experience for learners (64,4%) (Govender 2016: 117). The fact that some teachers did not agree that learners’ concentration (13,6%) and educational experience (35,6%) improved needs to be probed further.

The assessment by the teacher-participants was broadly shared by the members of the SGBs. They were also of the view that the NSNP resulted in improved school attendance (88,9%) and an enhanced educational experience (84,6%) (Govender 2016: 139). District officials also perceived the NSNP to increase school attendance and enhance learner concentration (Govender 2016: 169–170).

Whereas all the school principals agreed that the NSNP prevents malnutrition, promotes learners’ health and wellbeing, improves concentration and stamina, and results in improved school attendance among learners, they had slightly different estimates of the extent of the school attendance improvement (see Figure 1). Half

of the school principals indicated that attendance had increased by between 70% and 100%. The remaining respondents (25%) were equally split on improvement percentages (Govender 2016: 158–159).

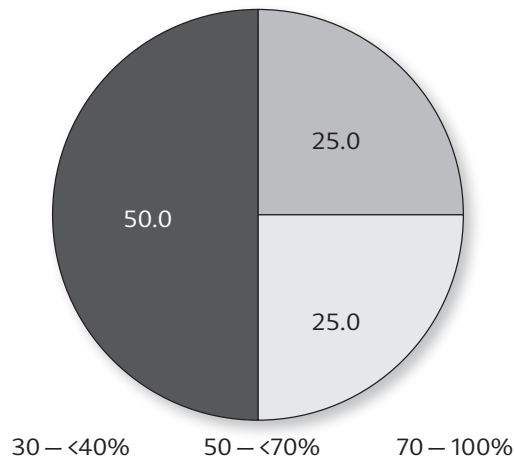


Figure 1: Estimations by school principals of student attendance improvements (Govender 2016: 159)

Local economic development

Although the research participants' lived experiences and subsequent perceptions confirmed that the NSNP is achieving its main purpose of improving the educational experience of poor school children in the selected schools, the study also provided support for a third consequence, namely the development of the local economy through the creation of jobs for food-handlers and service-providers (DPME 2016: 37; Govender 2016: 168, 148). The long-term advantage of this consequence is perceived as reducing poverty (Govender 2016: 38, 120). The 2016 evaluation of the NSNP identified this consequence as one of the strengths of this programme (DPME 2016: 139). This case study revealed evolving initiatives to empower co-operatives to produce fresh locally grown food for this programme (Govender 2016: 120). While the current study confirms perceptions of local economic development as a consequence of the NSNP, it does not provide evidence to confirm an actual improvement of local economic development as a consequence of the NSNP.

From the above, the expected consequences of the NSNP can be summarised as an improved nutritional status of the poorest learners, an improved educational experience for learners and local economic development. While the participants in this case study were in general agreement that the NSNP in the selected schools is indeed demonstrating these expected consequences, concerns evolved

from the analysis of the research data and require further investigation. These concerns relate to:

- the sufficiency of the meals, as 26,8% of teacher-participants had concerns about this aspect;
- the variety of menus and the scheduling (timing) of the meals;
- doubts among 35,6% of the teacher-participants about the success of the programme in enhancing the educational experience of learners; and
- 13,6% were unconvinced about improved learner concentration.

Continuing qualitative research is necessary to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of these matters.

CONCLUSION

The current study was triggered by, among other factors, a 2019 media statement by UNICEF that South African school children are increasingly consuming less nutritious and unhealthy food. At face value, this finding was unexpected after 25 years of focused government interventions to improve the nutritional status of school children in South Africa. This study therefore aimed to make sense of this apparent discrepancy through an exploratory study of the South African NSNP and its implementation at four schools in the KwaZulu-Natal province.

Whereas previous studies have approached this phenomenon (NSNP) from various theoretical perspectives, the current study dealt with the NSNP as a policy-implementation intervention. The implementation of the NSNP at the four selected schools has been studied as a case of this national intervention implemented in more than 19 000 schools.

This study found that the NSNP in South Africa is characterised by its nature (being a policy-implementation intervention), its primary focus on the improvement of the educational outcomes and experience of the poorest of learners through improving their nutritional status, its national (countrywide) scope, and its school-level (grassroots) implementation locality. Whereas the primary focus of this programme is the improvement of the educational experience of the poorest of learners, this case study identified the possibility that children who are eligible for this programme are excluded due to the quintile status of their schools.

Furthermore, it was found that for a national school nutrition programme to exist and succeed, certain enabling antecedents need to be in place. These antecedents include:

- a constitutional foundation;
- authorising legislation;
- mandating policies;
- institutional arrangements;
- budget allocations; and
- the monitoring and evaluation of the programme's implementation.

While the institutional arrangements are securely embedded in a network of legislative and policy imperatives, participants in this case study expressed a need for the decentralised implementation model as used in some of the other provinces. A decentralised model is perceived as providing more jurisdiction and discretion at the school level for selecting and appointing their preferred service-providers for the improved implementation of the NSNP.

All the abovementioned enabling antecedents proved to be well established in the case of the NSNP's implementation in the selected schools. The only antecedents that might shed more light on the seeming discrepancy between a well-functioning NSNP and the UNICEF finding of 2019 are the institutional arrangements and the programme monitoring and evaluation.

The implication of the NSNP's being an 'intervention' is the consequences or outcomes brought about by that intervention. Although the NSNP may have numerous consequences, the current study identified three core consequences: an improved nutritional status among participating learners; the participants' improved educational experience; and local economic development.

Even though a comparative longitudinal approach has not been followed in this current study, no evidence could be found in selected schools that children are 'increasingly consuming less nutritious and unhealthy food' (UNICEF 2019b: 7). This case study nevertheless provides convincing support, substantiated by a variety of evaluation studies and the lived experiences and perceptions of participants in the implementation of this intervention that the consequences of the NSNP do include an improved nutritional status of the participating learners in the selected schools. Moreover, it was confirmed that this led to an improved educational experience for them and, in addition, enhanced local economic development through job creation. As research on policy implementation failures has indicated (see Howlett et al 2015) and since this case study could not find compelling evidence of policy implementation failures, it is necessary to investigate further for possible hidden failure consequences or antecedents

such as a 'lack of funding, legitimacy issues, principal–agent problems, oversight failures and others' (Howlett et al 2015: 213).

This study has shown that the legitimacy of the NSNP as a policy implementation programme in South Africa is vested in its constitutional foundation, several pieces of authorising legislation, and specific national policy directives. However, a mostly hidden legitimacy issue is the inclusion criteria applied to determine the participating schools and learners for the programme. As indicated above, several research participants raised concerns about the flawed quintile system resulting in qualifying children being misclassified as part of quintile 4 or 5 communities and schools. The validity of these concerns has been confirmed by recent research studies (Van Dyk & White 2019: S2). If this is the case, it might be possible for a substantial number of qualifying learners to be in quintile 4 or 5 schools and therefore to be excluded from the NSNP.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to consider the principal–agent issue as a possible explanation for policy implementation failures (Howlett et al 2015: 213). Howlett applies the principal–agent theory specifically in a buyer–broker–seller situation 'in which the principal is dependent on the goodwill of the agent to further his or her interests' (Howlett 2019: 410). Howlett specifically refers to implementation issues related to the design of administrative structures and its implication for autonomy and discretion among administrative actors. While some of the research participants expressed a need for decentralised autonomy for schools, this may have unintended consequences. School principals may become the agents of the PED and simultaneously the principal of the agent (service-provider). Therefore, a typical buyer–broker–seller situation with the exchange of goodwill and interests may not be to the ultimate benefit of the participating school children (Howlett 2019: 10). However, this case study could not find any evidence of role-conflicts and unethical principal–agent relationships to the disadvantage of the school children. The study could also not find any evidence of oversight failures.

The NSNP is evidently a highly successful South African policy intervention. Yet this study revealed the need for simultaneously refining the institutional arrangements for the implementation of the programme – to enhance the capability and authority of the role-players at the level of implementation to ensure optimal benefit for the qualifying learners – and improving continuous monitoring, evaluation and oversight for optimal programme success.

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