

Nutritional Status of Public Primary School Pupils' in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in Akwa Ibom State

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

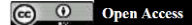
national home-grown school feeding programme (NHGSFP), nutritional status, programme implementation, perceived nutritional outcomes.

Vol. 01, No. 05, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23186914>

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effectiveness of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, by appraising its perceived nutritional outcomes on primary school pupils. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which the nutritional status of the pupils was perceived to have improved during the implementation of the programme. Using a mixed-methods descriptive survey design, the study sampled 278 respondents from three primary schools across the three senatorial districts of state. Data collection was employed through questionnaires and interviews. Chi-square test results showed no significant difference between observed and expected frequencies, indicating that the programme has not achieved its intended effects as perceived by respondents. Specifically, the NHGSFP was perceived not to have improved pupils' nutritional status due to inconsistent meals and gaps in the implementation of the programme. The study concludes that the NHGSFP has made progress in providing school meals to pupils but has not achieved the meaningful improvement in nutritional status that the programme was designed to deliver. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the NHGSFP in Akwa Ibom State should receive increased funding and better resource allocation to address issues of inconsistent financial support and delayed disbursements. It also suggested improving programme implementation and logistics by strengthening the logistical framework and enhancing coordination between government agencies, vendors, and schools.

Introduction

Nigeria, despite its enormous natural and human resources, continues to face persistent poverty and malnutrition challenges, particularly among vulnerable populations. According to the World Bank (2020), more than 40% of Nigerians, representing about 82 million people, live below the national poverty line. Poverty in Nigeria is not evenly distributed, as rural communities experience greater deprivation due to limited access to infrastructure, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) revealed that poverty rates in rural areas are significantly higher than those in urban centres. Opiyo et al. (2019) further observed that inadequate rural infrastructure creates barriers to agricultural productivity, market access, healthcare delivery, and educational opportunities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Climate change, poor governance, corruption, and inadequate rural development policies have also worsened food insecurity and economic hardship among vulnerable households (World Food Programme, 2020).

Children remain one of the most affected groups within this poverty cycle. Studies have shown that children from poor households are more likely to experience malnutrition, stunted growth, and micronutrient deficiencies, all of which negatively affect physical health, cognitive development, and academic performance (Adepoju, 2015). These conditions reduce children's educational prospects and limit their chances of escaping poverty in adulthood, thereby perpetuating intergenerational deprivation. In response to these challenges, governments and development agencies across the world have

increasingly adopted school feeding programmes as social intervention strategies aimed at improving child nutrition, enhancing school participation, and promoting educational development.

The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2016, represents one of such major social investment programmes targeted at addressing childhood hunger and malnutrition among public primary school pupils. The programme was designed to provide free and nutritious meals to pupils, improve school enrolment and attendance, stimulate local agricultural production, and support economic development through local food sourcing (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016). The NHGSFP also aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, zero hunger, quality education, health, and sustainable agriculture. According to Sitali (2021), the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme links agricultural development with school feeding initiatives by encouraging the sourcing of food from local farmers. Consequently, scholars and development agencies have identified the programme as an important strategy for improving food security and promoting children's well-being (WFP, 2020; Taylor & Ogbogu, 2016).

Notwithstanding the lofty objectives of the NHGSFP, implementation challenges have continued to affect its effectiveness in many parts of Nigeria. Several reports have identified inadequate funding, poor monitoring systems, irregular food supply, corruption, political interference, and poor infrastructure as major obstacles to the programme's successful implementation. In many public primary schools, inadequate kitchen facilities, poor sanitation systems, and weak accountability mechanisms have undermined programme delivery and reduced the consistency and quality of meals provided to pupils. These implementation concerns raise important questions about the extent to which the programme has improved pupils' nutritional status, specifically in terms of perceived anthropometric changes, meal adequacy, dietary diversity, and short-term hunger reduction, as distinct from programme delivery metrics such as funding and monitoring efficiency, particularly within the context of Akwa Ibom State.

Although previous studies have examined the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in Nigeria, most existing studies have focused on broader national evaluations and larger urban centres, with limited attention given to medium-sized cities such as Uyo in Akwa Ibom State. Furthermore, many of these studies concentrated on enrolment patterns and implementation challenges without adequately assessing the nutritional status of public primary school pupils within the local socio-economic realities of the study area. There is therefore limited empirical evidence on how the programme's implementation conditions, particularly governance structures, funding irregularities, and local food supply constraints, mediate specific nutritional outcomes among pupils in Akwa Ibom State.

It is against this background that this study seeks to appraise the nutritional status of public primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom and examine the effectiveness of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in improving child nutrition and educational outcomes. The study also aims to provide deeper insights into the implementation challenges affecting the programme and its broader implications for child welfare and social development in Akwa Ibom State.

Conceptual Issues

Poverty generally refers to a condition in which individuals or households lack adequate financial resources and access to necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare, education, and safe living conditions. According to the World Bank (2020), poverty extends beyond low income to include deprivation in well-being, opportunities, and social participation. In developing countries such as Nigeria, poverty is often associated with unemployment, food insecurity, poor infrastructure, and limited

access to quality public services. Rural populations are particularly vulnerable because of inadequate economic opportunities and poor social amenities, with child poverty in these settings manifesting largely as food insecurity and undernutrition conditions that the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme was specifically designed to address. Persistent poverty has significant consequences on health, education, and nutritional outcomes, especially among children. Poverty has been conceptualized differently by scholars and international development agencies. The World Bank (2020) defines poverty as a condition in which individuals are unable to attain a minimum standard of living necessary for human well-being. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) views poverty as multidimensional deprivation encompassing inadequate income, poor health, lack of education, and limited access to opportunities. This broader perspective recognizes that poverty extends beyond monetary deprivation to include social exclusion and vulnerability. In Nigeria, poverty has remained a major developmental challenge despite the country's abundant natural resources.

Scholars have classified poverty into different forms. Absolute poverty refers to a situation where individuals lack the resources necessary to meet basic survival needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. Relative poverty, on the other hand, exists when individuals possess fewer resources than the average members of their society, thereby limiting their ability to participate fully in social and economic activities (Todaro & Smith, 2020). More recently, the concept of multidimensional poverty has gained prominence because it recognizes that poverty encompasses several deprivations relating to health, education, living standards, and social inclusion. This study focuses on multidimensional poverty, as it best captures the intersecting deprivations that characterize the conditions of public primary school pupils targeted by the NHGSFP.

Malnutrition refers to deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in a person's intake of nutrients and energy required for healthy growth and development. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), malnutrition encompasses undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, and obesity. It commonly manifests in forms such as undernutrition, stunting, wasting, and micronutrient deficiencies. However, in many developing countries, undernutrition remains the most prevalent form of malnutrition, particularly among children. Undernutrition occurs when individuals do not consume sufficient nutrients to meet their physiological requirements, thereby affecting growth, health, and overall development. According to Adepaju (2015), malnutrition among children negatively affects cognitive development, physical growth, immunity, and academic performance. In many developing countries, child malnutrition is closely linked to poverty, food insecurity, and inadequate healthcare systems. Poor nutrition during childhood can have long-term effects on educational achievement and future productivity. Consequently, school feeding programmes have emerged as important interventions for addressing nutritional deficits among vulnerable children.

Malnutrition among children is commonly measured through indicators such as stunting, wasting, underweight, and micronutrient deficiencies. Stunting refers to low height-for-age and is often associated with chronic nutritional deprivation. Wasting is characterized by low weight-for-height and reflects acute malnutrition, while underweight refers to low weight-for-age. Micronutrient deficiencies, often referred to as "hidden hunger," result from inadequate intake of essential vitamins and minerals such as iron, vitamin A, iodine, and zinc (UNICEF, 2023).

School feeding programmes are government or institutionally sponsored interventions aimed at providing meals to school children in order to improve nutrition, encourage school attendance, and enhance educational performance. The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP)

in Nigeria was introduced as part of the Federal Government's social investment initiatives to address child hunger and improve learning outcomes among public primary school pupils. According to Sitali (2021), home-grown school feeding programmes also support local agriculture by sourcing food items from local farmers, thereby stimulating rural economies and improving food systems. Historically, school feeding programmes emerged as responses to concerns about child welfare and educational participation. Over time, they evolved into broader social protection mechanisms that address food insecurity, poverty reduction, and human capital development. Various models of school feeding exist, including in-school meals, take-home rations, fortified snacks, and home-grown school feeding approaches. Among these, the home-grown model has gained increasing attention because it integrates school feeding with local agricultural development.

The Home-Grown School Feeding Programme differs from conventional school feeding initiatives because it emphasizes the procurement of food from local farmers and suppliers. This approach creates a market for local agricultural products, stimulates rural economies, and generates employment opportunities while simultaneously improving child nutrition (Bundy et al., 2018). Consequently, the programme serves both social and economic objectives.

Nutritional status refers to the condition of an individual's health as influenced by the intake, absorption, and utilization of nutrients. It reflects the extent to which physiological requirements for growth, development, and maintenance are being met through dietary consumption. According to Gibson (2019), nutritional status is a measure of the balance between nutrient intake and the body's nutritional needs. It is commonly used to assess the health and well-being of individuals and populations, particularly children. Good nutritional status is essential for children's physical growth, mental development, academic performance, and overall well-being. Poor nutritional status among school children has been linked to poor concentration and low school attendance.

Assessment of nutritional status is often conducted using anthropometric indicators such as height, weight, body mass index (BMI), weight-for-age, height-for-age, and weight-for-height measurements. These indicators help identify conditions such as stunting, wasting, underweight, overweight, and obesity. In addition to anthropometric measures, nutritional status may also be assessed through dietary intake surveys, clinical examinations, and biochemical tests that evaluate nutrient deficiencies and health outcomes.

The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) is one of the flagship social intervention programmes introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2016 under the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP). The programme was established to address child hunger, improve nutritional outcomes, increase school enrolment and attendance, and support local agricultural production through the procurement of food items from local farmers (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016; Adepoju & Johnson, 2019). The programme provides one nutritious meal daily to pupils in public primary schools and is intended to contribute to poverty reduction, educational development, and food security among vulnerable households.

The NHGSFP was designed with multiple objectives. These include improving the nutritional status of school-aged children, enhancing school enrolment and retention, reducing classroom hunger, improving pupils' cognitive development and academic performance, and creating economic opportunities for local farmers and food vendors (Bundy et al., 2018). The programme also aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) (United

Nations, 2015). Through these objectives, the programme seeks to address both educational and socio-economic challenges simultaneously.

The implementation of the programme involves collaboration among federal, state, and local government authorities. While the Federal Government provides policy direction and funding support, state governments coordinate implementation activities, including the recruitment of food vendors, monitoring of meal quality, and supervision of programme operations (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, 2021). The home-grown approach adopted by the programme emphasizes the sourcing of food items from local farmers, thereby strengthening local agricultural value chains and generating employment opportunities within communities (World Food Programme, 2020).

Evidence suggests that the NHGSFP has produced positive effects on enrolment and short-term hunger reduction (Ahmed & Babatunde, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022), and has created economic opportunities for food vendors and local farmers. However, results on nutritional outcomes remain mixed, with concerns about meal adequacy, irregular food supply, and weak monitoring systems limiting the programme's impact on pupils' nutritional status (Eze & Okeke, 2022; Olatunji & Adebisi, 2023).

In Akwa Ibom State and particularly in Uyo metropolis, the relevance of the programme is underscored by the need to improve child nutrition and educational outcomes among public primary school pupils. Despite the programme's rollout across the state, there remains limited evidence on its nutritional outcomes in medium-sized cities such as Uyo, Eket, and Ikot-Ekpene, where local implementation conditions may differ significantly from larger urban centres. Given that adequate nutrition is essential for physical growth, cognitive development, and academic performance, it becomes necessary to examine the extent to which the programme has achieved its objectives among beneficiaries. Assessing the nutritional status of pupils participating in the programme will therefore provide valuable insights into its effectiveness and identify areas requiring policy attention and improvement.

Empirical Studies

Several empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in improving child nutrition and educational outcomes in Nigeria. Existing literature generally suggests that the programme has contributed positively to pupils' nutritional status and school participation. Adebayo and Yusuf (2022) found that pupils who benefited from the programme exhibited higher energy levels, improved immunity, and better nutritional indicators compared to non-beneficiaries. Similarly, Olufemi et al. (2023) reported reductions in anaemia and vitamin deficiencies among programme beneficiaries, while Adepoju and Emmanuel (2022) observed improvements in body mass index (BMI) and reductions in stunting in states where the programme was effectively implemented. These findings indicate that school feeding programmes can positively influence children's health and learning outcomes.

Despite these positive impacts, several studies have identified major implementation challenges affecting the effectiveness of the programme. Oyeboode et al. (2020), Abubakar (2023), and Roseline and Felix (2021) identified issues such as inadequate funding, irregular food supply, corruption, poor monitoring systems, and political interference as major barriers to effective implementation. In some states, poor infrastructure, including inadequate kitchens, storage facilities, and sanitation systems, has affected meal preparation and service delivery. These findings suggest that although the NHGSFP has

significant potential to improve child nutrition and educational participation, its success largely depends on effective implementation, transparency, and accountability mechanisms.

Beyond Nigeria, evidence from other developing countries suggests that school feeding programmes have contributed significantly to improving child nutrition and educational outcomes. In Ghana, Aurino et al. (2019) found that the Ghana School Feeding Programme improved school attendance and reduced short-term hunger among pupils, particularly in rural communities. However, the study noted that the programme's impact on long-term nutritional outcomes was constrained by irregular funding and inconsistencies in meal quality. This finding suggests that while school feeding programmes can improve access to education and nutrition, their effectiveness largely depends on the consistency and quality of programme implementation.

Similarly, research conducted in Kenya by Gelli et al. (2018) revealed that school feeding programmes contributed to improved enrollment, retention, and concentration levels among primary school pupils. The study further observed that schools participating in home-grown feeding initiatives benefited from stronger linkages with local farmers, thereby supporting rural livelihoods and local economic development. Nevertheless, challenges relating to food supply chains and programme sustainability were identified as major constraints. These findings highlight the broader socio-economic benefits of school feeding programmes beyond their nutritional objectives.

Within the Nigerian context, Ahmed and Babatunde (2021) examined the implementation of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in selected states and found that the programme significantly increased school enrollment and attendance, especially among children from low-income households. The study also reported improvements in pupils' classroom participation and attentiveness. However, respondents expressed concerns regarding the nutritional adequacy of meals served and the irregularity of food supply in some schools. This suggests that while the programme has recorded notable successes, concerns remain regarding the quality and sustainability of service delivery.

In a related study, Eze and Okeke (2022) assessed stakeholders' perceptions of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in South-Eastern Nigeria. Their findings revealed that parents and teachers generally viewed the programme positively because of its contribution to reducing hunger among pupils and encouraging school participation. However, concerns were raised about inadequate monitoring mechanisms, delayed payments to food vendors, and insufficient community involvement in programme implementation. The study concluded that stronger monitoring and stakeholder participation would enhance programme effectiveness and accountability.

Furthermore, Olatunji and Adebisi (2023) investigated the relationship between school feeding and nutritional outcomes among public primary school pupils in South-Western Nigeria. Their findings indicated that beneficiaries of the programme recorded better nutritional indicators than non-beneficiaries, particularly in terms of weight-for-age and overall dietary diversity. However, the researchers noted significant variations in programme outcomes across different locations due to differences in funding levels, administrative capacity, and local implementation practices. This finding underscores the importance of examining the programme within specific local contexts, as implementation conditions may influence its effectiveness. Consequently, there remains a need for empirical studies that assess the nutritional status of pupils and the effectiveness of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in specific locations such as Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, where local realities may shape programme outcomes differently.

A review of empirical literature shows a broad consensus that school feeding programmes contribute positively to school enrollment, attendance, nutritional status, and educational participation. However, the extent of these benefits is often influenced by factors such as funding adequacy, monitoring mechanisms, meal quality, stakeholder involvement, and local implementation capacity. While several studies have examined the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in different parts of Nigeria, limited attention has been given to assessing its effectiveness in improving perceived anthropometric outcomes, meal adequacy, dietary diversity, and short-term hunger reduction among public primary school pupils in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. Moreover, the mediating influence of governance structures, funding irregularities, and local food supply constraints on these nutritional outcomes remains insufficiently examined. This gap provides the justification for the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Elite Theory, originally propounded by Pareto (1916) and Mosca (1939), and later extended by Mills (1956), which explains how policy decisions and public programmes are often influenced by a small group of politically and economically powerful individuals within society. According to the theory, elites control major political and economic resources and therefore influence policy formulation, implementation, and resource allocation. Within the context of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in Akwa Ibom State, political office holders, contractors, and programme administrators may influence how programme benefits are distributed and implemented. Consequently, implementation outcomes may reflect political interests and patronage rather than the actual nutritional needs of public primary school pupils. This dynamic operates through elite capture of programme resources, where politically connected contractors and administrators divert funding, manipulate food supply chains, and prioritise patronage networks over service delivery, resulting in the exclusion of the most vulnerable pupils who lack political voice or representation. Elite Theory is therefore relevant to this study because it provides insight into how governance structures and political influence may affect the effectiveness of the programme.

Gap in Literature

Although previous studies have examined the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme in Nigeria (e.g., Ahmed & Babatunde, 2021; Eze & Okeke, 2022; Olatuni & Adebisi, 2023), limited empirical attention has been given to medium-sized cities such as Uyo, Eket and Ikot-Ekpene. Most studies focused on national assessments, school enrolment, or implementation challenges without adequately examining the nutritional status of public primary school pupils within local socio-economic contexts, which is an outcome gap compounded by the fact that most existing studies did not employ perceptual nutritional indicators to assess pupils' actual nutritional conditions. Furthermore, there remains insufficient evidence on how governance challenges, funding irregularities, and local implementation conditions influence programme outcomes in the study area. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by assessing the nutritional status of public primary school pupils in Akwa-Ibom and examining the effectiveness of the NHGSFP in improving child nutrition and educational outcomes.

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive survey design to appraise the implementation and perceived nutritional outcomes of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) on public primary schools in Akwa Ibom State. A multi-stage sampling technique was used as three senatorial districts were purposively selected, one public primary school was chosen from each, and respondents were selected through simple random sampling for pupils and purposive sampling for

teachers, parents, and programme officials. A total sample of 278 respondents participated in the study, with 274 completed questionnaires retrieved for analysis. The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 margin of error.. Data were collected through structured questionnaires. Pupil data were collected in schools during break periods, while parents and programme officials were reached through scheduled visits and PTA meetings. The instrument was pilot-tested and yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the Chi-square (χ^2) test at the 0.05 level of significance.

Result Presentation

Statistical data, as represented by the frequency distribution, indicated how often each variable appeared in the distribution. Accordingly, out of the 278 administered instruments, only 274 were retrieved from the respondents for final analysis.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Respondent category	Pupils	120	43.8
	Teachers	60	21.9
	Parents	74	27.0
	Programme officials	20	7.3
Sex	Male	130	47.4
	Female	144	52.6
Senatorial district	Uyo (Central)	96	35.0
	Eket (South)	92	33.6
	Ikot Ekpene (North)	86	31.4
Age group (years)	Below 12	96	35.0
	12-30	70	25.5
	31-45	78	28.5
	Above 45	30	10.9

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 274 respondents. However, the pupil category constituted the largest proportion at 120 (43.8%), followed by parents at 74 (27.0%), teachers at 60 (21.9%), and programme officials at 20 (7.3%). This distribution is significant, as pupils are the direct beneficiaries of the NHGSFP, while parents, teachers, and officials provided complementary observations on programme delivery. By sex, female respondents were slightly more represented at 144 (52.6%) compared with 130 (47.4%) male respondents, indicating a balanced gender distribution. The respondents were also drawn proportionately from the three senatorial districts, confirming that the sample achieved adequate geographical representation across the state. Concerning age, the majority (35.0%) were below 12 years, reflecting the pupil population, while adult respondents were distributed across the 12-30 (25.5%), 31-45 (28.5%), and above-45 (10.9%) age brackets. This spread confirms that the study captured perspectives from both direct beneficiaries and adult stakeholders responsible for programme implementation and supervision.

Table 2: Perceived Impact of the NHGSFP on the Nutritional Status of Pupils

Variable	SA	A	D	SD	Total		
1. The nutritional quality of meals provided through the NHGSFP has improved pupils' health.			72 (26.3%)	79 (28.8%)	66 (24.1%)	57 (20.8%)	274 (100%)
2. Pupils' who participate in the NHGSFP show visible improvements in overall physical well-being.			64 (23.4%)	74 (27.0%)	71 (25.9%)	63 (23.7%)	274 (100%)
3. The regular provision of school meals has reduced malnutrition rates among pupils.			70 (25.5%)	66 (24.1%)	74 (27.0%)	64 (23.4%)	274 (100%)
4. There is an increase in the energy levels and attentiveness of pupils receiving NHGSFP meals.			75 (27.4%)	71 (25.9%)	68 (24.8%)	60 (21.9%)	274 (100%)
5. The NHGSFP has significantly enhanced the daily nutrition intake of primary school pupils.			66 (24.1%)	77 (28.1%)	69 (25.2%)	62 (22.6%)	274 (100%)
Pooled total			347	367	348	308	1,370

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses on the perceived impact of the NHGSFP on pupils' nutritional status across five statements. On the first item, 72 (26.3%) strongly agreed, and 79 (28.8%) agreed that the nutritional quality of meals had improved pupils' health, while 66 (24.1%) disagreed. A similar pattern is observed across the remaining items. Taken together, the pooled responses show that agreement (SA + A = 714) slightly exceeds disagreement (D + SD = 656). This indicates that while a modest majority of respondents perceived some positive contribution of the programme to pupils' nutrition, a substantial remained unconvinced. The closeness of these proportions suggests that opinion on the programme's nutritional impact is divided, with no overwhelming consensus in either direction, which is a pattern that foreshadows the statistical outcome reported in Table 3.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis: The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) has no significant positive impact on the nutritional status of primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 3: Chi-Square Analysis of the Perceived Impact on Nutritional Status

Response Category	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	(O-E) ² /E
SA	347	342.5	0.059
A	367	342.5	1.753
D	348	342.5	0.088
SD	308	342.5	3.475
χ^2			5.375

χ^2 calculated = 5.375; df = 3; critical value (0.05) = 7.815; p = 0.146. since 5.375 < 7.815, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Table 3 presents the Chi-square analysis testing whether the NHGSFP has a significant positive impact on the nutritional status of primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom State. The observed frequencies were compared against an expected frequency of 3432.5 per category. The analysis produced a calculated χ^2 value of 5.375 at 3 degrees of freedom, with a p-value of 0.146 against a critical value of 7.815 at the 0.05 level of significance. Since the calculated value (5.375) is less than the critical value (7.815), and the p-value (0.146) exceeds 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

This result indicates that the responses obtained from the respondents do not provide sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme has significantly improved the nutritional status of primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom State. In other

words, although some respondents may perceive that the programme has contributed to improved nutrition, the observed differences in responses were too small to establish a statistically significant impact.

The finding further suggests that any improvement in the nutritional status of the pupils cannot be pinned solely to the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme. Other factors, such as household income, parental feeding practices, food availability, healthcare services, and the consistency and quality of meals provided under the programme, may also influence the nutritional status of pupils. Therefore, while the programme may have made some contribution to pupils' welfare, the evidence from this study does not show that its impact on nutritional status is statistically significant.

This finding underscores the need for government and programme implementers to strengthen the implementation of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme by ensuring regular meal provision, improving the nutritional quality of meals, enhancing monitoring and supervision, and providing adequate funding. These measures may improve the programme's effectiveness and its contribution to the nutritional well-being of primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom State.

The result aligns with Adeola (2018), who suggests that when a social programme shows no significant deviation from expected outcomes, it indicates the programme is operating as planned but may require improvements to address underlying challenges. Kline (2015) supports this, stating that a Chi-square value below the critical threshold suggests the programme's effects are consistent with expectations. However, it may also point to issues like inadequate funding, implementation problems, or inconsistent political support, which could limit the programme's broader impact, such as in poverty alleviation and nutritional improvement (Esan et al., 2021). Wilson (2021) and Fola (2019) also note that social welfare programmes often meet initial expectations but struggle to achieve long-term, transformative impacts. The NHGSFP's lack of significant deviation from expected outcomes may indicate that, while it has not worsened conditions, it has not yet brought about substantial change. This suggests the need for better strategies, monitoring, and political commitment to enhance the programme's effectiveness. Ultimately, while the NHGSFP aligns with expectations, the lack of significant progress highlights the need for adjustments in funding, implementation, and political support to realize its full potential.

Discussion of Findings

The study on the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) in Akwa Ibom State reveals significant insights into the programme's performance regarding the nutritional status of primary school pupils. Despite its well-defined objectives, the findings indicate that the NHGSFP has not had a statistically significant impact in this area, as shown by the Chi-square test. The hypothesis examining the programme's effect on nutritional status returned a Chi-square value of 5.37, which is lower than the critical value of 7.815 at a 95% confidence level ($p = 0.146$). This suggests that the programme's impact on nutritional status has been consistent with expectations but lacks significant improvement. While the NHGSFP fulfills its function of providing meals, it has not led to the anticipated significant improvements in nutrition. Possible explanations for this include inconsistent meal quality, inadequate portions, or logistical delays, as noted by Okoro (2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study set out to investigate the impact of the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) on the nutritional status of primary school pupils in Akwa Ibom State,

Nigeria. The Chi-square test showed that the programme has not produced a statistically significant improvement in pupils' nutritional status of pupils ($\chi^2 = 5.375 < 7.815$; $p = 0.146$)

The findings reveal that while the NHGSFP has functioned within the expected parameters, it has not produced the transformative impact that was initially anticipated. Specifically, the programme has not significantly improved the nutritional status of pupils, as evidenced by the lack of deviation from expected outcomes.

The result points to several challenges that constrain the programme's effectiveness, including inadequate funding, poor implementation, and insufficient political commitment. These factors limit the programme's ability to achieve lasting improvement in the nutritional status of pupils. The findings therefore suggest the need for a more comprehensive approach, involving greater mon, improved coordination, and broader socio-economic support, if the programme is to realize its intended benefits.

Recommendations

i. Ensure Timely and Effective Funding:

Timely and effective release of funds should be prioritized to ensure the quality and consistency of meals provided to beneficiaries. A streamlined financial disbursement process, coupled with enhanced monitoring mechanisms, will help the programme achieve its objectives more efficiently.

ii. Improve Programme Implementation and Logistics:

To enhance the effectiveness of the NHGSFP, it is necessary to address the logistical challenges and delays in meal distribution. Strengthening the logistical framework, improving the monitoring systems, and ensuring that meals are delivered on time to school are critical steps.

iii. Strengthen Political Commitment and Accountability:

The success of the NHGSFP hinges on strong political will and consistent support from political leaders. It is recommended that political leaders take full ownership of the programme, allocate adequate resources, and ensure long-term sustainability.

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