

June 2026

Designing Inclusive and Sustainable School Meal Programmes in Challenging Contexts



Learners enjoying their lunch in one of the complementary schools under the Mukuru Pilot. *Venta Karimi, VICCO*

Lessons from the Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme

Designing Inclusive and Sustainable School Meal Programmes in Challenging Contexts

Policy Brief

June 2026

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Abbreviations

VICCO	Viwandani Comprehensive Community Organisation
WFP	World Food Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
NACONEK	National Council for Nomadic Education in Kenya
KES	Kenya Shilling
ECDE	Early Childhood Development and Education
APBET	Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training

June 2026

Executive summary



Learners enjoying lunch in Mukuru, Nairobi.
Venta Karimi, VICCO, 2025

In Nairobi's informal settlements, most children are excluded from school meal programmes not because of a lack of need, but because of how these programmes are designed. Over 70% of school-going children in informal settlements attend low-cost complementary schools that are not part of government-supported school meal programmes. This creates a structural "double exclusion" where children in informal settlements are mostly excluded from public education systems and from the school meal programmes delivered through them.

To find ways to overcome this double exclusion, TMG Research, together with partners Viwandani Comprehensive Community Organisation (VICCO) and Ruben Centre, jointly piloted an innovative model for delivering school meals in complementary schools in informal settlements: the Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme. This pilot involved six complementary schools, reaching a total of 1,149 learners. The model's four key characteristics are:

- To address questions of financial sustainability, the Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme included progressive financial contributions by parents to fund it. By the end of the pilot phase, parents covered 85% of meal costs (KES 21.40).
- Through a co-design process with the community, the cost per plate was reduced from KES 50 to KES 25, while maintaining the necessary nutritional diversity of the meals.

- A school meals committee enhanced trust and community confidence in the management of the school meals programme, which proved to be crucial to achieving the high level of financial contributions by parents.
- An internal mechanism, financed through parent contributions to cater for the most vulnerable children, was also developed to ensure that all children could benefit from the programme regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.

While our insights are grounded in a specific implementation context, these findings offer a strong basis for broader considerations for school meals policy debates. The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme demonstrates that sustaining and expanding the gains of current school meal efforts is not only a financial challenge but also a design one. Innovations in programme design can expand coverage of school meal programmes even in highly challenging settings.

The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme also points to a changing role of public resources in school meal programmes. Increasingly limited public resources should be used to catalyse innovative models and to ensure inclusion, instead of covering the major share of the school meal programme's operating costs.

Background

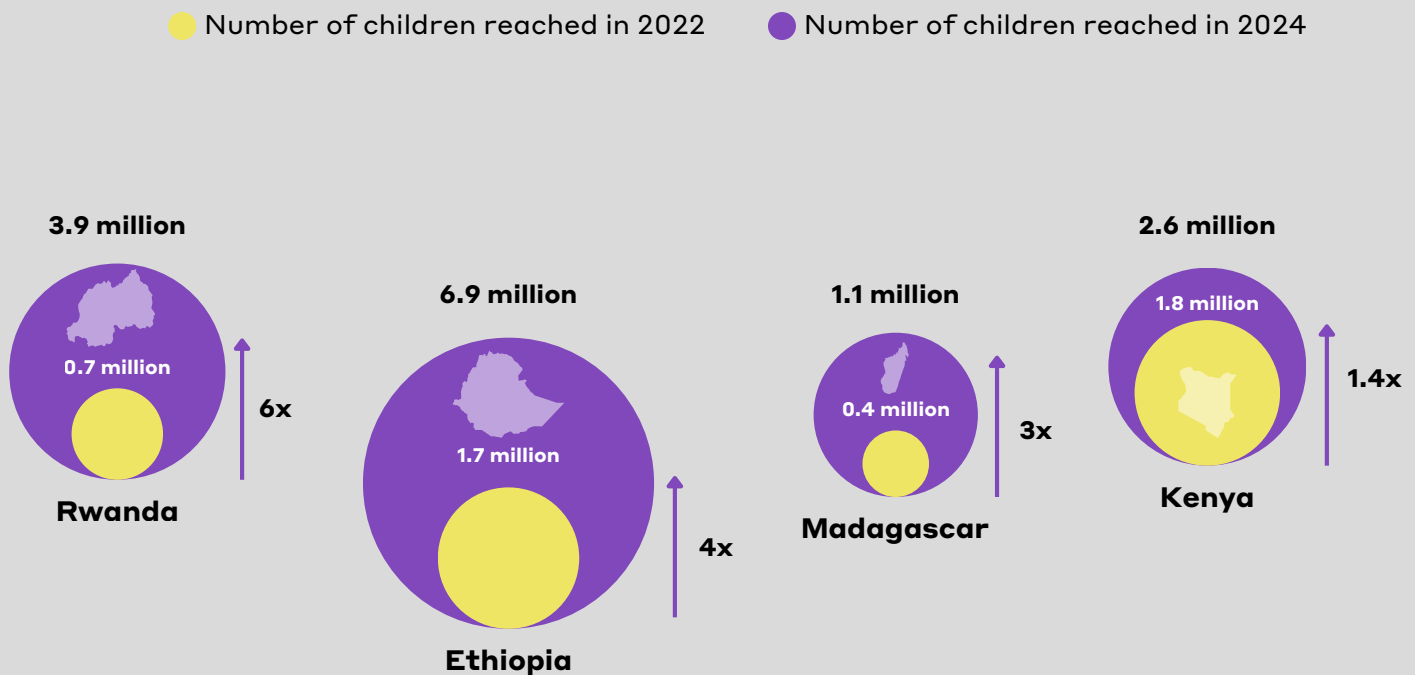
Globally, school meal programmes reach about 466 million children as of 2024, marking a commendable increase of 80 million children since 2020 (World Food Programme (WFP), 2024).

Africa saw the highest increase in coverage, with more than 20 million additional children covered by school meal programmes.

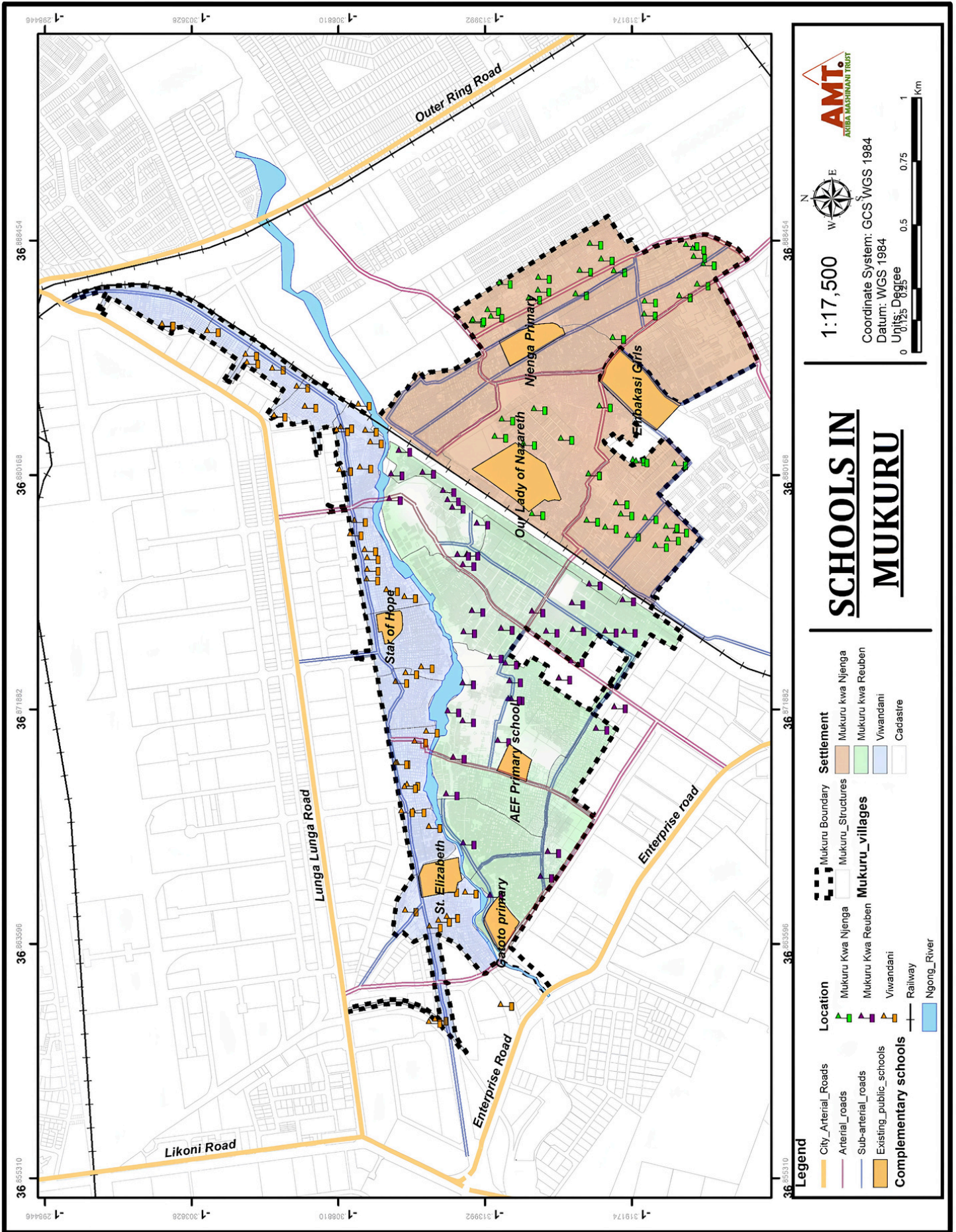
Despite their global scale and benefits, school meal programmes continue to leave significant populations of vulnerable children unreached (UNICEF, 2012; Wang et al., 2021; World Food Programme (WFP), 2024). This is evident in Mukuru, one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements. More than 70% of Mukuru's primary school-going children (over 27,000) attend low-cost complementary schools, while only 30% (about 10,000) have access to the five public schools in the settlement, according to a survey conducted by TMG Research and the Akiba Mashinani Trust.

This is consistent with findings from National Council for Nomadic Education in Kenya (NACONEK) (2020) which indicates that at least 62% of primary school-going children in Nairobi's informal settlements attend complementary schools. Despite hosting most of the children in the settlement, these complementary schools remain outside the national and county school meal programmes.

The result is a structural misalignment that produces systemic exclusion: children are excluded from both publicly funded education and the school meal programmes delivered through it.



Source: WFP (Redesigned by Elias Waliula, 2026)



Map showing schools in Mukuru. AMT, TMG, 2023

The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme

Parent contributions to ensure financial sustainability of the school meals programme

Affordability and willingness to pay were tested by progressively increasing parents' contributions. September 2024 was treated as an introductory month, during which parents did not pay, allowing learners and parents to experience the meals before contributions began. Contributions were then introduced in stages based on an initial benchmark meal cost of KES 30: 25% in October 2024, 50% in January 2025, and 75% in February 2025. The planned move to full cost recovery in March 2025 was paused after parents raised concerns about the pace of increase, and the contribution remained at 75% for that month. This allowed TMG Research, VICCO, and Ruben Centre to respond to community feedback rather than simply follow the fixed payment schedule detached from household realities.

The final meal price of KES 25 was informed by meal cost records, parent contribution trends, menu testing, sourcing and preparation data, and consultations with parents, school administrators, and implementing partners. Pricing was treated not only as a financial question but also as a governance question: what parents were willing to pay also depended on perceived meal quality, trust in management, clarity of communication, and confidence that contributions were being used transparently.

Reducing the cost per plate, while maintaining nutritional diversity

The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme introduced a clustered delivery model across six complementary schools in Mukuru Viwandani, one of the three main settlements within Mukuru. Meals are prepared in one school (Hope Gateway) and distributed to the other five schools. Procurement is done through the kitchen hub. The operational design and efficiencies created through joint sourcing and preparation reduced the cost of a meal from as high as KES 50 in the individual school meal programmes to KES 25.

Other school meal programmes aim to reduce costs by realising economies of scale through a few centralised kitchens that prepare meals for a high number of schools. This model is harder to achieve in Mukuru, as the road access to most complementary schools in informal settlements is challenging. Results our survey showed that 46% of the complementary schools in Mukuru can only be accessed through a footpath with only 18% and 35% having access through motorable tarmac and murram roads, respectively. The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme therefore needed to balance economies of scale in the kitchen and transport costs. In the final design, one kitchen served a total of 1,149 pupils from six schools.

Through a co-design process, parents decided on the menu option that corresponded with their ability to pay and their interest in securing nutritionally diverse meals for their kids. They chose from the following options, with option III being the one that was finally adopted.



KES 25

Cost per meal

1,149

Pupils fed daily

85%

Parent contribution percentage

6

Schools served

Table 1: Menu options and pricing tested in the pilot implementation



Option I

Weekly Menu:

Mon: Ugali + green grams + cabbage
Tue: Muthokoi + yellow beans + cabbage
Wed: Ugali + green grams + spinach
Thu: Ugali + yellow beans + cabbage
Fri: Rice + green grams + cabbage

Average meal cost

KES 20.00



Option II

Weekly Menu:

Mon: Ugali + green grams + cabbage
Tue: Muthokoi + yellow beans + cabbage
Wed: Ugali + green grams + cabbage
Thu: Rice + green grams + cabbage
Fri: Rice + yellow beans + cabbage + banana

KES 22.50



Option III

Weekly Menu:

Mon: Muthokoi + yellow beans + cabbage
Tue: Ugali + green grams + spinach
Wed: Ugali + yellow beans + cabbage
Thu: Rice + green grams + cabbage
Fri: Ugali + meat + cabbage

KES 25.00



Option IV

Weekly Menu:

Mon: Ugali + yellow beans + cabbage
Tue: Rice + green grams + cabbage
Wed: Rice + green grams + cabbage
Thu: Rice + green grams + cabbage + banana
Fri: Ugali + meat + spinach

KES 30.00

Parental oversight of the school meals programme

The Mukuru Community-led School Meal Programme introduced a community-led school meals committee, dubbed the Viwandani Community-led School Meals Committee. The committee was composed of parent representatives from the six schools, school head teachers, VICCO, and the Ruben Centre. The committee plays several roles in the management and oversight of the programme, including:

- Oversight of the financial management of the programme.
- Oversight on programme and meal quality, including review of delivery processes and outcomes, meal quality and quantity and menu reviews.
- Enforcement of parent contributions, through school and parent level engagements.
- Outreach to other stakeholders, including potential funders, to support the programme.
- Developing and enforcing the programme's standard operating procedures, including procurement, food safety and handling.

The committee holds monthly meetings to review the programme. Through smaller subcommittees, the team reviews the different aspects of the programme and makes recommendations on the necessary actions that are needed to ensure smooth implementation.

Updates on challenges, including resource constraints, sourcing and market challenges, are raised at the committee and addressed during the meeting. The different subcommittees are then tasked with following up on the matters, and a report back is tabled during the next meeting.

Ensuring the participation of vulnerable children

As the pilot phase came to an end, one key challenge remained: parents were now responsible for paying 100% of the meal cost per plate, and the programme needed to ensure that it would continue to reach all children, including those whose parents are not able to pay either in full or partially. The matter was tabled before the committee for deliberation, after which members agreed to introduce a targeted support provision for the most vulnerable learners. Under this arrangement, each school would be allowed to identify up to five learners who could continue accessing meals even where their households were unable to pay. The individual cases of the supported learners were to be presented by the school to the committee and reviewed every month for approval by the full committee. This was to ensure that only genuine cases were supported.

Further to the relief provided through the exemption of the most vulnerable learners, the financial mobilisation sub-committee is tasked with securing financial support to cover the funding gap. Previous efforts of this subcommittee have raised significant resources to support the most vulnerable learners to continue to access meals. An online fundraiser in partnership with tuiFund has so far raised over 3,000 USD to support the project. These funds are directly channelled to the programme to support the operations.



Viwandani School Meals Committee, 2025
Emmanuel Atamba

Policy recommendations

1. Parental oversight drives trust, participation, and local financing

Embed participatory governance in school meal programmes design from the outset. Parent involvement in all aspects of programme design and implementation, transparent pricing and programme oversight are key for the design of inclusive and sustainable school meal programmes.

The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme's participatory governance through the community-led school meals committee received strong endorsement by parents, with more than 88% of parents expressing trust and satisfaction in how the programme was run. Involving parents in menu design, pricing and oversight of the programme was crucial in building trust amongst parents, which contributed to high participation and payment rates, demonstrating that transparent, participatory governance was core to success.

This aligns with evidence from other research which shows that participatory oversight and accountability mechanisms significantly boost school meal programme quality (Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2025). Research from Tanzania also shows that structured engagements are crucial to sustain parent participation in school meal programmes (Swila et al., 2024).

Parents engagement meeting at Dynamic Community Academy.

Dr Serah Kiragu, TMG 2025



2. Treat complementary schools as legitimate partners for school meals in informal settlements

Recognise complementary schools as legitimate school meal delivery channels in informal settlements. The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme demonstrates that there are accountability mechanisms for successful programme delivery even in challenging and fragile contexts.

The Mukuru pilot shows that reaching the children excluded from the public school system requires school meal systems to work with, not around, informal education realities. In Mukuru, complementary schools are not peripheral providers; they are the de facto education infrastructure for thousands of children who cannot access public schools because of distance, overcrowding, safety risks, or hidden costs. The pilot deliberately partnered with these schools and reached a total of 1,149 learners across six schools, most of whom were previously outside functional school meal provision. This matters because policy models anchored only in public schools risk reproducing urban inequality. Children are excluded from school meals not because their need is lower, but because the institutions serving them are not recognised, are under-supported, and often outside public delivery channels.

The lesson from Mukuru is therefore not to romanticise informality, but to work with it. It is to emphasise that complementary schools are legitimate entry points for equitable school meal programmes, and their recognition is a first step towards inclusive school meal programmes. Further steps include working with locally trusted community-based organisations, ensuring transparent management, involving parents and building accountability systems. The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme demonstrates that fragile contexts, such as informal settings, can generate practical institutional innovations for inclusive and sustainable school meal programmes.

3. Use the programme design to drive cost efficiency, access, and participation

Uniform design of school meal programmes will not deliver inclusive and sustainable solutions. Context matters. Considerations of the number of meals per kitchen, menu options, sourcing, preparation and delivery mechanisms must be guided by the local realities.

The Mukuru pilot shows that the operational design can improve cost efficiency, reliability, and coverage. Across the six pilot schools, joint procurement, cooking, and distribution reduced the meal cost by more than half, from KES 50 to KES 25, while improving quality and consistency. The resultant cost efficiency saw increased willingness by parents to not only enrol their children in the programme but also make financial contributions towards it. These findings align with comparative evidence showing that school feeding programmes vary widely in cost, and that cost efficiency is largely shaped by programme design choices (Burbano et al., 2009). In another study that reviewed the cost of a school meal across 216 programmes in 102 countries, (Bedasso & Acosta, 2025) conclude that significant efficiency gains can be derived from design choices, including among other aspects, scale, logistics, and menu planning.

4. Higher parental contributions are possible and key for financial sustainability

Recognise parent contributions in school meal policies and programmes as a key avenue towards financial sustainability. Higher parental contributions rely on parents' ability to oversee the programme. Community oversight of school meal programmes for accountability is key to realising higher parent contributions.

When meal fees reached KES 25, parents on average covered 85% of direct food costs (about KES 21.40 per plate). These results show that parent contributions can play a big role in school meals programme financing. Between August 2025 and April 2026, the programme raised about KES 2.6 million in parent contributions alone. Recognising the potential for parent contributions is therefore important in securing programme viability, especially in the context of limited resources available to finance school meal programmes.

This approach to financing is not without precedent. A study of parent contributions to school meal programmes in Tanzania found that 75% of parents had a positive perception towards contributing to the cost of the meals (Haule & Mwinami, 2024). The Rwanda school feeding strategy considers parent contributions, in cash or in kind, as a key component in its national school meal programme financing (Republic of Rwanda, 2023).

Parent dialogue on menu options and pricing at Jamaica Junior Academy.
Dr Serah Kiragu, TMG 2025



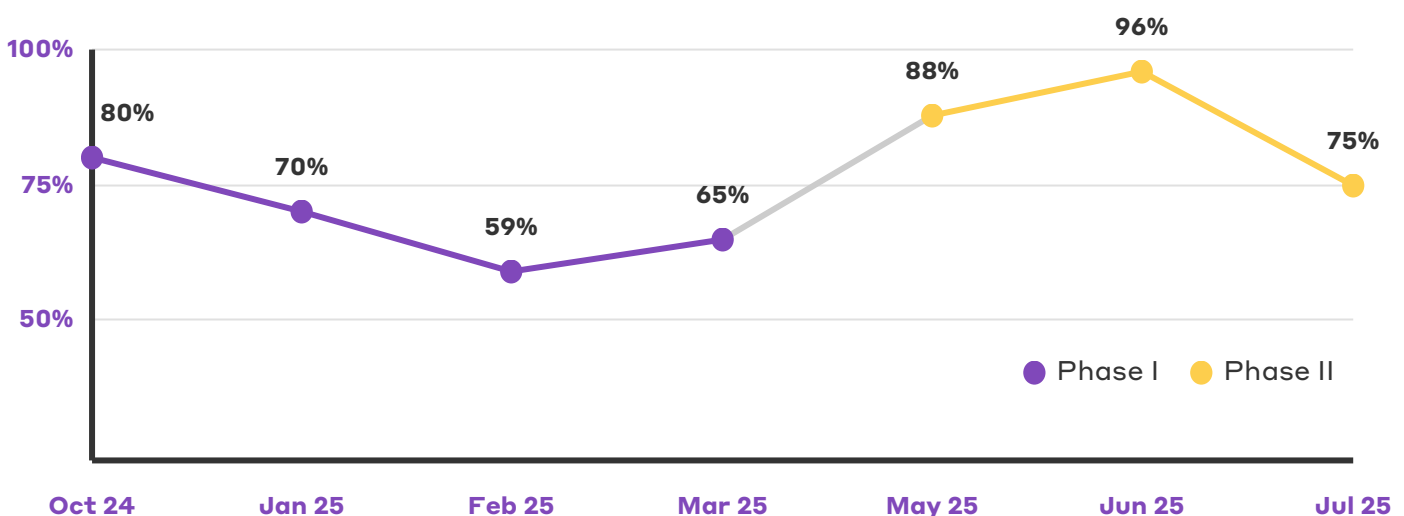
Table 2: Phase I parent contributions. (First month, September 2024, did not involve parent contributions; October was the last school month of the year)

Month	Parent contribution rate	Amount expected per meal from parents (KES)	Meals served	Expected parent contribution (KES)	Amount collected (KES)	Payment recovery rate	Actual recovery per meal (KES)
Oct 2024	25%	7.50	10,574	79,306	63,567	80%	6
Jan 2025	50%	15	12,734	191,010	133,355	70%	10.50
Feb 2025	75%	22.50	11,428	257,130	152,273	59%	13
Mar 2025	75%	22.50	13,713	308,543	200,230	65%	15
Total/Average			48,449	835,989	549,425	66%	11.30

Table 3: Phase II: parent contributions data, beginning May 2025. (April was school holiday, August was also a school holiday)

Month	Parent contribution rate	Amount expected per meal from parents (KES)	Meals served	Expected parent contribution (KES)	Amount collected (KES)	Payment recovery rate	Actual recovery per meal (KES)
May 2025	100%	25	14,707	367,675	322,525	88%	22
Jun 2025	100%	25	9,307	232,675	223,346	96%	24
Jul 2025	100%	25	12,628	315,700	237,114	75%	19
Total / average	100%	25	36,642	916,050	782,985	85%	21.4

Payment Recovery Rate Trend (Table 2 & Table 3)



5. Equity requires deliberate targeting, not uniform provision

Combine parent contributions with targeted subsidies to secure access for children whose parents cannot afford to contribute to school meal programmes.

Research shows that subsidising the poorest students yields the greatest long-term benefits (Verguet et al., 2020) and that financing models must be adapted to the local context rather than applied uniformly (Locke et al., 2025).

In food-insecure contexts, there will be parents who cannot afford to contribute financially to sustain school meal programmes. In the Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme, this amounted to 15% of the overall programme's operational costs.

Universally applied fees, therefore, risk excluding children from low-income families, even if most parents pay. These findings show that while parent contributions can play an important role, care must be taken to avoid them becoming discriminatory in the way that they are applied. In the Mukuru pilot, the school meals management committee developed a mechanism to identify learners who are unable to pay and allow them to continue receiving meals as external funds drive to cover their meals. Community-designed safeguards play a crucial role in identifying and addressing the funding gaps without discriminating against children who cannot afford the set contribution amount either in full or partially.

85%

parents
contribution

15%

of programme costs
remain unfunded

**TARGETED
SUBSIDIES**

not uniform fees
protect the most vulnerable

**COMMUNITY
SAFEGUARDS**

can play a crucial role in
protecting the most
vulnerable in society

Conclusion

Rethinking school meals design for inclusion and sustainability

The Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme shows that a central challenge for school meals is how to design delivery systems so that they can reach the children most likely to be left out. In Mukuru, many children attend complementary schools because public schools are too few, too far, overcrowded, or difficult to access safely. Yet, school meal programmes are still largely organised around public-school delivery channels. This creates an equity gap: children are excluded from meals not because of a lack of need, but because of how these programmes are designed.

The results from our work in Mukuru show that this exclusion is not inevitable. By working with complementary schools, local organisations, parents, and school administrators, the programme reached children who were previously outside functional school meal provision. Joint procurement and preparation reduced meal costs, participatory governance strengthened trust and accountability, and structured parent contributions helped sustain delivery. These are not isolated operational adjustments. Together, they show that school meal coverage depends on how programmes are governed, financed, and organised in relation to the realities of children's lives.

At the same time, our evidence from Mukuru should not be read as an argument for shifting responsibility from the state to poor households. Parent contributions can strengthen programme viability where trust, transparency, and value for money are established, but they cannot replace public responsibility. Even with strong community participation, an affordability gap remained for the most vulnerable households. Equity therefore requires targeted public subsidies, matching finance, or other safeguards to ensure that children are not excluded because their households cannot pay. Public financing remains essential, but it should be directed more strategically toward the children, institutions, and delivery gaps that local systems cannot address on their own.

Lunch preparation in the central kitchen in Mukuru. *TMG, 2025*



For Kenya and school meal programmes more broadly, what the Mukuru pilot suggests is that expanding school meal coverage in Kenya is as much a design challenge as it is a financing problem. The above five policy recommendations set out a practical proposition to expand current coverage, which will require more than scaling existing models. It will require school meal programmes to reach children where they are, including in complementary and non-state schools. Translating them into practice will require recognising complementary schools as legitimate delivery channels, and school meal implementers to adapt school meals to the realities of their settlements.

The task ahead is to utilise both public financing and local contributions by designing school meal systems in which community financing strengthens continuity, while public and partner resources protect equity, especially for children in schools and households that the current system does not reach. Without these shifts, school meal programmes will continue to reach the children easiest to serve, while leaving those most in need outside the system.

Food delivery in Mukuru. TMG, 2025



Annex 1

Overview of the research approach

TMG Research, VICCO, and Reuben Centre pursued an action research process to co-develop, test, adapt, and document the Mukuru Community-led School Meals Programme. The research responded to a specific equity gap: many children in Mukuru attend low-cost complementary schools because of limited access to public schools, yet these schools remain largely outside government-supported school meal provision.

The research combined contextual analysis, participatory design, pilot implementation, continuous operational data collection, and community feedback. It was informed by surveys on schools and school meal provision in Mukuru, followed by household and parent perception surveys during implementation. The pilot brought together six complementary schools through a cluster model, with joint sourcing and preparation through a shared kitchen, meal distribution to participating schools, progressive parent contributions, and participatory oversight.

Schools and parent representatives were involved in menu development, pricing discussions, feedback sessions, and programme review. This participatory design was central to the research approach because the pilot was testing not only whether meals could be delivered, but whether a trusted, locally governed model could improve affordability, participation, and programme continuity.

The research examined four interrelated dimensions of school meal delivery. First, it assessed operational design, including sourcing, procurement, preparation, distribution, food safety, and infrastructure constraints. Second, it examined affordability and cost recovery, including the relationship between meal costs, parent contributions, and household payment patterns. Third, it analysed institutional arrangements for accountability, including the roles of local organisations, school administrators, parents, and the Viwandani Community School Meals Committee. Fourth, it explored sustainability and equity by identifying both the potential of local financing and the residual affordability gap facing the most vulnerable households.

Operational data was collected throughout implementation. This included ingredient prices, quantities purchased and cooked, procurement sources, meal volumes, menu composition, preparation requirements, energy use, transport arrangements, and the number of meals served per day. Costs were recorded by unit of purchase, such as kilogrammes of rice, pieces of cabbage, litres of cooking oil, or bags of charcoal briquettes. These records were used to compare the cost implications of different starch, protein, and vegetable combinations, and to assess how bulk procurement, shared preparation, cooking time, and scale shaped the final meal cost.

Parent contribution data was collected through both M-Pesa Paybill and cash payments made through schools. Each learner was assigned a payment reference to support tracking by school and pupil, while the cash option was retained to avoid excluding parents who faced barriers to digital payment. The data were organised by expected collections, actual collections, recovery rates, and actual recovery per meal. These records were triangulated with parent meetings, school feedback, and household and perception surveys to interpret payment behaviour, affordability constraints, trust, communication challenges, and willingness to pay.

The action research design allowed implementation and learning to proceed together. Monthly review meetings with partners, school administrators, and parent representatives were used to identify operational issues, review payment trends, discuss parent concerns, and adjust implementation. In the second phase of the pilot, the focus shifted toward institutional sustainability, including strengthening the school meals committee and supporting the development of protocols on procurement, financial management, monitoring, food safety, and accountability.

The research was therefore not designed only to assess whether one pilot worked. It was designed to generate practical lessons on how school meal programmes can be structured in fragile urban contexts where standard public delivery models do not reach all children. Its core value lies in linking operational evidence, parent contribution data, and community governance insights to inform more equitable, financially resilient, and context-sensitive school meal models.

Table 4: Participating schools and their learner population

	Schools	ECDE/Pre-primary) (Play Group; PP1; PP2)	Lower Primary (G1-G3)	Upper Primary (G4-G6)	Total school population
1	Dynamic Community Academy	63	113	71	247
2	Jamaica Junior Academy	43	43	3	89
3	PCEA Lunga Lunga Elite Care Centre	76	42	6	124
4	Mukuru Outreach Academy	113	130	134	377
5	REFACO Garden Learning Centre	51	56	55	162
6	Hope Gateway Education Centre	56	56	38	150
	Total number of pupils	402	440	307	1,149
	Percentage of learners based on categories	35%	38%	27%	



Discussion of the way forward for the feeding programme. TMG 2025

Annex 2

Description of meals

Ugali: *Ugali* is a staple dish in Kenya, made from maize flour, sometimes sorghum, or millet dish, and is a staple across Kenya. It is prepared by cooking the flour in boiling water until it forms a stiff or firm dough-like consistency. It is typically eaten by hand, and served alongside sauces or stews made from vegetables, meat, fish or legumes.



Ugali at an eatery in Nairobi. Elias, 2026



Ndengu at an eatery in Nairobi. Elias, 2026

Ndengu: *Ndengu* is a common legume widely consumed in Kenya as a stew made with green grammes, often served with rice. It is prepared by boiling the beans until they become soft, often after soaking to reduce cooking time. Ndengu can be cooked plain or combined with ingredients such as onions and tomatoes to enhance flavour.

Muthokoi: *Muthokoi* is a dish prepared using dehusked maize and beans, and is prepared by boiling the maize and beans together, often followed by frying with oil and salt for added flavour. The maize is traditionally dehusked by grinding dry maize in a mortar with a pestle, followed by sieving and winnowing to eliminate the outer skin and husks.



Muthokoi preparation in Mukuru. TMG 2025

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Who we are

TMG Research is dedicated to driving just and sustainable transitions through action research and advocacy. Committed to a rights-based approach, our programmes focus on responsible land governance, food systems transformation in rural and urban settings, and adaptation to climate change.

At TMG, science with society is more than a principle; it's how we work to ensure equitable pathways to sustainable development. We explore how local innovations and global policies intersect to drive systemic change, ensuring that international frameworks are both inspired by and responsive to community-led transformations. Our research projects and advocacy are co-developed with civil society, policymakers, scientists and the private sector to ensure international sustainability efforts are informed by emergent innovations and forge real-world solutions.

TMG is headquartered in Berlin, with a team in Nairobi. Our research focuses primarily on the European Union and Africa, including Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi and South Africa.

Partners

This project was implemented by TMG Research together with its partners, Viwandani Comprehensive Community Organisation (VICCO), and Ruben Centre to deliver school meals in low-cost complementary schools in Mukuru.



This publication was made possible with the financial support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)



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