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CHALLENGES FACING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MBEYA DISTRICT COUNCIL, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

School feeding programmes can improve learners' nutrition, attendance, and performance, yet their delivery in Tanzanian public secondary schools depends on the consistent action of parents, schools, and Parents-Teachers' Associations (PTAs). This study examined the parent-related, school-related, and PTA-related challenges affecting the implementation of school feeding programmes in six public secondary schools in Mbeya District Council. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used. Questionnaires were administered to 48 respondents (parents, students, and PTA committee members) selected by simple random sampling, while 18 key informant interviews and three focus group discussions (18 teachers) were purposively organised, giving 84 participants in total. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively in SPSS and qualitative data thematically. Parent-related challenges were dominated by household poverty (52.1%) and delayed contributions: 97.9% reported that late contributions had affected meals, although 95.8% had been informed of their responsibilities. School-related challenges centred on inadequate cooking facilities (56.3%) and staff (60.4%), with coordination resting mainly on Food Teachers (47.9%) rather than Heads of Schools (20.8%). PTAs met in every school, but half held only one or two mobilisation meetings a year and only 27.1% always reported finances to parents. Parents were the main financer in 97.9% of responses, and 72.9% reported programme interruptions. The study concludes that implementation is constrained less by missing structures than by resource and capability shortfalls within them, and that weakness in any one actor can break the implementation

chain. Flexible contribution schedules, investment in kitchens and cooking staff, and more frequent and transparent PTA engagement are recommended.

KEYWORDS: School feeding programmes, implementation challenges, parents, school management, Parents-Teachers' Association, Mbeya District Council.

1. INTRODUCTION

School feeding programmes are widely recognised as an effective education and social protection intervention, improving learners' nutrition, attendance, and academic performance (World Food Programme [WFP], 2024). Yet these benefits have not translated into consistent delivery in many low- and middle-income countries, where implementation is undermined by inadequate financing, weak institutional coordination, limited stakeholder participation, and fragile community ownership (Peng, Li, & Wang, 2023). Evidence from Africa suggests that the three groups on whom delivery depends, namely parents, schools, and Parents-Teachers' Associations (PTAs), do not operate independently: limited parental contribution reduces the resources available to schools, weak school coordination fails to convert those resources into regular meals, and weak PTAs leave no mechanism to mobilise parents or secure accountability (African Union Commission [AUC], 2023; Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023).

Tanzania's National School Feeding Guidelines assign parents responsibility for contributions, schools for day-to-day coordination, and PTAs for community mobilisation and accountability (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2021). In practice, parental contributions fall short, school-level planning and resource management are weak, and PTA participation in governance and financial oversight is limited (Haule & Mwinami, 2024; Chacha & Biswalo, 2025; Akyoo & Akyoo, 2025). Mbeya District Council illustrates these dynamics. Its public secondary schools run feeding programmes largely without donor support, relying on the parent–school–PTA model, and because the district is predominantly agrarian, parents' capacity to contribute is directly exposed to seasonal farm income (Mbeya District Council, 2024; President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government [PO-RALG], 2024).

Existing evidence offers only a partial basis for understanding this problem. Much of it concentrates on nutritional and learning outcomes among primary school pupils (Chavula & Matafwali, 2025), and studies of secondary schools tend to isolate a single dimension rather than examine how parent-, school-, and PTA-related challenges jointly shape implementation

(Haule & Mwinami, 2024; Chacha & Biswalo, 2025). Context-specific evidence for Mbeya District Council is scarce. This paper therefore examines three objectives: parent-related, school-related, and PTA-related challenges affecting the implementation of school feeding programmes in public secondary schools in Mbeya District Council, and then considers how the three interact. The findings are intended to inform schools, PTAs, local authorities, and education policymakers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by the Resource-Based View (RBV), which holds that performance depends on the availability, management, and effective use of tangible and intangible resources (Barney, 1991). Although developed in strategic management, the RBV applies readily to school feeding: parents supply cash, food, and labour; schools supply leadership, planning, supervision, and coordination; and PTAs supply mobilisation, communication, and financial oversight. Parent-, school-, and PTA-related challenges can therefore be read as shortfalls in household resources, institutional capability, and governance capacity respectively. The RBV, however, gives less attention to external factors such as national policy design (Barney & Hesterly, 2019). Pressman and Wildavsky's (1984) implementation theory complements it: policies fail less because of poor design than because execution depends on a long chain of actors, each of whom must act for the intended outcome to occur. The RBV thus explains why each actor's resource base matters, while the implementation-chain logic explains why weakness in any one actor can compromise the programme as a whole.

2.2 Empirical Review

Parent-related evidence points mainly to economic capacity. Irregular household income has been identified as the leading constraint on parental support for school feeding in rural Tanzania (Haule & Mwinami, 2024) and Ethiopia (Tesfaye & Alemu, 2023). Awareness and attitudes, however, were also significant predictors of parental engagement in day secondary schools in Nyamagana District (Donald & Nderego, 2026), and Peng et al. (2023) report that effective mobilisation can sustain participation even in low-income communities. Participation beyond contribution matters too: ownership is stronger where parents help to decide how resources are used (Wanjiku & Mutiso, 2024), yet parents are often engaged mainly to approve or pay contributions (Chacha & Biswalo, 2025).

On the school side, inadequate kitchens, equipment, and staff are recurring operational constraints in Tanzania and across sub-Saharan Africa (George, 2025; Liguori et al., 2024; Tamiru et al., 2024). School food committees may exist without being effective, partly because of competing obligations and the absence of clear national guidelines (Roothaert et al., 2021), and active involvement of school heads is associated with stronger coordination and resource mobilisation (Blount & Conklin, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

For PTAs, the intensity, not merely the existence, of mobilisation shapes parental compliance (WFP, 2024). Transparent and regular financial reporting increases parental trust and willingness to contribute (Mwangi, 2023), and multi-channel communication strengthens collaboration (UNICEF, 2024), whereas PTAs in several Tanzanian districts convened mainly to approve contributions (Chacha & Biswalo, 2025). These dimensions have mostly been studied separately; little evidence shows how they operate together in public secondary schools in Mbeya Region. This study addresses that gap.

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Mbeya District Council in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, which covers about 2,813 km² and had 371,259 residents in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). The district has 28 wards and 143 villages, and its economy rests mainly on smallholder farming. Three wards (Utengule Usongwe, Iwindi, and Nsalala) and six public secondary schools with operational feeding programmes, two per ward, were purposively selected on the basis of records from the District Education Office.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used: quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The estimated population of students, parents, and PTA committee members in the six schools was 3,960 (Mbeya District Council, 2024). Yamane's (1967) formula at a 15% level of precision gave 44, which was adjusted upward to 48 to allow eight respondents per school. These respondents were drawn by simple random sampling (lottery method) from school registers and completed a structured questionnaire. In addition, 18 key informants (six Heads of Schools, six Food Teachers, and six PTA Chairpersons) were purposively selected for interviews, and three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with six teachers each (18 participants), giving 84 participants in total. Qualitative sampling continued until responses converged (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2023). All percentages reported below come from the 48 questionnaire respondents; interview and FGD material is used to explain them.

Quantitative data were checked, coded, and analysed descriptively (frequencies and percentages) using SPSS version 30, and qualitative data were analysed thematically following established trustworthiness criteria (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2021). Instruments were reviewed by the supervisor and education research experts and pre-tested outside the sample, and the questionnaire was translated into Kiswahili. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Iringa and permission from Mbeya District Council and the schools; participation was voluntary, with informed consent and confidentiality assured. Limitations include the small questionnaire sample and descriptive analysis, which restrict generalisation; a population estimated from typical enrolment patterns because no central register was available; reliance on respondents' perceptions rather than records; and a single-district scope. Triangulation with interviews and FGDs partly mitigates these limits.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Profile

Of the 48 respondents, 60.4% were female and 39.6% male. Over a third (37.5%) were under 20 years, reflecting the inclusion of students, while 45.8% were aged 30–49 years and 12.5% were 50 or older. Just over half (52.1%) had secondary education and 35.4% primary education; the rest held a certificate, diploma, or degree. The sample therefore combines learners' views with those of the adults who fund and oversee the programme.

4.2 Parent-Related Challenges

Table 1 shows that parents are well informed but constrained. Most respondents (95.8%) said parents had received information on their responsibilities and 83.3% had attended at least one programme meeting, although only 25.0% attended always (58.3% sometimes). Involvement was concentrated on resources: financial (79.2%) and food (77.1%) contributions were far more common than participation in decision-making (35.4%) or monitoring (33.3%).

The binding constraint was cash. Some 91.7% reported that parents had failed to contribute because of financial difficulties, and 68.8% named money as the most difficult contribution, against 25.0% for food and 6.3% for labour. Only 8.3% said contributions were always made on time, and 97.9% said that delays had affected meal provision. Poverty (52.1%) and resistance or delayed contribution (22.9%) were the leading challenges, while low awareness accounted for only 8.3%.

Table 1: Parent-related challenges. (n = 48)

Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Awareness and participation		
Received information on responsibilities	46	95.8
Attended at least one meeting	40	83.3
Contribute money	38	79.2
Contribute food	37	77.1
Take part in decision-making	17	35.4
Take part in monitoring	16	33.3
Financial capacity and timeliness		
Failed to contribute due to hardship	44	91.7
Contributions always on time	4	8.3
Delays affected meal provision	47	97.9
Most difficult contribution		
Money	33	68.8
Food	12	25.0
Labour	3	6.3
Major parent-related challenge		
Low household income	25	52.1
Resistance/delayed contribution	11	22.9
Low awareness of the programme	4	8.3
Poor meeting attendance	4	8.3
Large family size	2	4.2
Other family financial needs	2	4.2

Source: Field data, 2026.

"Many families here in the rural areas are small-scale farmers who depend on income from agriculture … However, during the harvest season, when they are given the opportunity to contribute food crops instead, most of them do so." (KII, Head of School, 2026)

Interviewees also described unkept pledges: "Many parents make empty promises during school meetings. After the meetings, they do not fulfil the contribution commitments they made" (KII, Food Teacher, 2026). These results agree with evidence that irregular household income, rather than disinterest, limits parental support (Haule & Mwinami, 2024; Tesfaye & Alemu, 2023). They sit in tension with Donald and Nderego (2026), who found awareness to be a significant predictor of engagement; a plausible reading is that awareness matters most where it is lacking, whereas here information had largely been provided, leaving economic capacity as the remaining constraint. Peng et al. (2023) caution against attributing weak participation to poverty alone, and the accounts of unkept pledges suggest that compliance, not only capacity, is at issue. The imbalance between contributing and deciding mirrors

Chacha and Biswalo's (2025) finding that parents are engaged mainly to pay, which weakens ownership (Wanjiku & Mutiso, 2024). With parents bearing almost the whole financing burden, heavier reliance on them without stronger school and PTA capacity also risks fostering dependency (Tamiru et al., 2024).

4.3 School-Related Challenges

As Table 2 shows, the formal architecture is in place: every respondent confirmed a school committee, 91.7% reported a written implementation plan, and 85.4% reported regular monitoring. Coordination, however, rests mainly with Food Teachers (47.9%) and school committees (31.3%) rather than Heads of Schools (20.8%), and implementation meetings are usually held only once per term (64.6%). The shortfalls are material. More than half of respondents judged cooking facilities (56.3%) and staffing (60.4%) inadequate, whereas storage (31.3%) and water (20.8%) were less often rated inadequate. Poor infrastructure (45.8%) and shortages of utensils and equipment (20.8%) were the leading challenges.

Table 2: School-related challenges. (n = 48)

Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Coordination and planning		
School committee present	48	100.0
Implementation plan prepared	44	91.7
Implementation monitored	41	85.4
Meetings held once per term	31	64.6
Coordinated mainly by		
Food Teacher	23	47.9
School Committee	15	31.3
Head of School	10	20.8
Rated inadequate		
Cooking facilities	27	56.3
Number of staff	29	60.4
Food storage	15	31.3
Water supply	10	20.8
Major school-related challenge		
Poor infrastructure	22	45.8
Shortage of utensils/equipment	10	20.8
Water scarcity	6	12.5
Inadequate storage space	4	8.3
Shortage of cooking staff	4	8.3
Inadequate food supply	2	4.2

Source: Field data, 2026.

"Food is often prepared using an open, three-stone firewood stove; there is also no formal store for keeping food … eating utensils such as cups, plates and spoons are not owned by the school itself but are brought by the students themselves from home." (KII, Food Teacher, 2026)

Physical and material constraints therefore outweigh governance gaps, consistent with studies reporting inadequate kitchens, equipment, and staff in Tanzania and elsewhere (George, 2025; Liguori et al., 2024; Tamiru et al., 2024). The universal presence of committees should not, however, be read as effective coordination. Roothaert et al. (2021) found that school food committees in northern Tanzania existed but remained of questionable effectiveness, and placed this within a wider policy gap in which no binding framework assigns or resources the coordination role. The delegation of coordination to Food Teachers, who carry full teaching loads ("teachers concentrating more on their teaching duties and forgetting to follow up on the food programme"; KII, Food Teacher, 2026), appears to reflect the same gap, and may limit the authority available to resolve decisions on budgets, staffing, and infrastructure (Blount & Conklin, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

4.4 PTA-Related Challenges

PTAs organised mobilisation meetings in every school (Table 3), but intensity was low: half of respondents (50.0%) reported only one or two meetings in the previous year, and 4.2% reported none. Parents' involvement in PTA decisions was high on food contributions (89.6%) but much lower on budgeting and monitoring (43.8% each) and meal scheduling (35.4%). Communication relied mainly on meetings (60.4%) and letters (25.0%), with WhatsApp or SMS used in only 6.3% of cases. Financial records were available for review in 75.0% of cases, yet PTAs always reported finances to parents in only 27.1%, and only 29.2% said parents were always informed on how contributions were used. Lack of time to attend meetings (25.0%), poor communication (22.9%), and financial hardship (20.8%) were the leading challenges, ahead of infrequent meetings (14.6%) and lack of transparency (12.5%).

Table 3: PTA-related challenges. (n = 48)

Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Mobilisation		
PTA holds mobilisation meetings	48	100.0
Meetings held in previous year		
None	2	4.2
One to two	24	50.0

Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Three to four	14	29.2
More than four	8	16.7
Parents involved in decisions on		
Food contributions	43	89.6
Budgeting	21	43.8
Monitoring	21	43.8
Meal scheduling	17	35.4
Communication and accountability		
Financial reports always provided	13	27.1
Financial records available	36	75.0
Parents always informed on fund use	14	29.2
Main communication channel		
Meetings	29	60.4
Letters	12	25.0
Phone calls	4	8.3
WhatsApp/SMS	3	6.3
Major PTA-related challenge		
Lack of time to attend meetings	12	25.0
Poor communication	11	22.9
Financial hardship	10	20.8
Infrequent PTA meetings	7	14.6
Lack of transparency	6	12.5
Parents ignoring PTA information	2	4.2

Source: Field data, 2026.

"… conflicts of interest and complaints from fellow parents who accuse PTA members of colluding with teachers to misuse their contributions, especially where there is no transparency in income and expenditure." (KII, PTA Chairperson, 2026)

The pattern is of a governance body that exists and meets but mobilises infrequently and reports inconsistently. This matches the finding that the intensity of mobilisation shapes compliance (WFP, 2024) and Tanzanian evidence of PTAs convening mainly to approve contributions (Chacha & Biswalo, 2025). That records exist while reporting is irregular supports Mwangi's (2023) point that regular reporting, not record-keeping alone, builds trust. Because the leading challenges are logistical (time and communication), simple mobile-based channels could reach parents who miss meetings (UNICEF, 2024). Reporting and participation should nonetheless be strengthened together, since transparency without real opportunities to take part in budgeting and monitoring may do little to change compliance.

Interviewees also linked PTAs' weak leverage over non-compliant parents to the absence of a binding policy framework with defined sanctions.

4.5 Integrating the Findings: Implementation Status

Taken together, the three sets of findings show a common pattern (Table 4). Meals were provided daily in 79.2% of responses, yet 72.9% reported that the programme had been interrupted at some point. The leading reasons were poor parental contribution (29.2%), lack of funds (27.1%), and lack of food (20.8%), with poor management cited by only 8.3%. Parents were named as the main financer by 97.9% and as the largest contributor by 95.8%. Teachers in an FGD captured the interaction: shortage of funds among parents, lack of a clear policy, shortage of utensils, and low turnout all contribute to interruptions.

Table 4: Implementation status and financing of the programme. (n = 48)

Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Meal provision		
Meals provided daily	38	79.2
Programme interrupted	35	72.9
Main reason for interruption		
Poor parental contribution	14	29.2
Lack of funds	13	27.1
Lack of food	10	20.8
Poor management	4	8.3
Other	7	14.6
Financing		
Parents are main financer	47	97.9
Parents contribute the most	46	95.8

Source: Field data, 2026.

Consistent with the RBV, implementation is constrained less by missing structures (committees, PTA meeting cycles, and financial records exist almost everywhere) than by resource and capability shortfalls within them: parents lack regular cash, schools lack kitchens and cooks, and PTAs lack frequent meetings and consistent reporting. The implementation-chain logic explains why these shortfalls matter jointly. Because parents are almost the sole financiers, a delay in one link, parental cash, can interrupt meals even where school coordination and PTA mobilisation are functioning adequately. The findings also qualify the wider literature. They confirm that economic constraints dominate parent-related challenges, but the moderating effect of mobilisation reported by Peng et al. (2023) may depend on a baseline intensity that these schools have not yet reached. Studies that diverge

from the present results (Donald & Nderego, 2026; Roothaert et al., 2021; Tamiru et al., 2024) indicate that economic capacity, participation, and committee presence are necessary but not sufficient, so awareness-building, careful framing of parental responsibility, and policy reform are plausible complements to resource-focused action.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined parent-, school-, and PTA-related challenges affecting school feeding in six public secondary schools in Mbeya District Council. Parents are informed and largely participate, but are constrained by seasonal household income and are involved mainly as financiers rather than decision-makers. Schools have the required committees, plans, and monitoring, but lack adequate cooking facilities and food-preparation staff, and coordination rests mainly with Food Teachers. PTAs meet in every school, but mobilisation is infrequent and financial reporting inconsistent. Read together, implementation is undermined by near-total dependence on financially constrained households, compounded by infrastructural gaps and limited multi-stakeholder collaboration, so that a shortfall in any one actor can interrupt meals.

First, Heads of Schools and PTAs, with Mbeya District Council, should adopt flexible contribution arrangements, such as monthly instalments or food crops in place of cash, as one sampled school already does, and involve parents in budgeting and monitoring. Second, school management, the District Council, the Ministry responsible for education, and development partners should prioritise rehabilitating and equipping kitchens, utensils, and storage, explore recognised community volunteer arrangements for food preparation, and encourage Heads of Schools to coordinate the programme more directly. Third, PTAs should hold mobilisation meetings more often than the current one to two a year, add written or mobile-based (SMS or WhatsApp) financial reports, and widen parents' role in budgeting and monitoring. Fourth, the Ministry and PO-RALG should review the National School Feeding Guidelines to give PTAs a clear framework, including defined sanctions, for persistently non-compliant parents. Further research should use larger, more representative samples across Tanzania and examine financing and cost-sharing models that reduce secondary schools' dependence on household contributions.

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