



Midday Meal Program in Nepal: A Practices Towards Inclusive and Equitable Education



Fruits
And Berries

Complex
Carbohydrates



Vegetable



Protein Food



Education Watch Report 2024



Midday Meal Program in Nepal: A Practices Towards Inclusive and Equitable Education

(Education Watch Report 2024)

Report Produced By



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Mr. Narendra Dangol

National Convener

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Reviewer's Remarks on the Education Watch Report 2024

This report presents the perceived truth of the people regarding the importance of midday meals for school children. The overwhelmingly shared sentiment affirms that this program must be continued without interruption. However, there is a common concern that the current allocation of Rs. 15 per child per midday meal is insufficient. This concern calls for innovative funding mechanisms and the application of distributive justice to ensure sustainability and effectiveness.

The real-life cases documented in the report serve as compelling testimonies to support this claim. Furthermore, the analysis of quantitative data presents a contrasting perspective to the perceived truths, indicating the need for a mixed-method research approach to obtain a more holistic understanding.

The academic framing and analysis of field findings enrich the report, transforming grassroots realities into insightful knowledge. The intellectual craftsmanship and penmanship of Dr. Rupa Munakarmi in shaping and organizing this report are highly commendable. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to review such a significant and meaningful piece of research.

Professor Dr. Bidya Nath Koirala
Educationist

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Introduction of Education Watch Group Nepal

Education Watch is a people-centric right to education movement began in 2015 in Nepal. The focus of Education Watch is on monitoring compliance at both national and local levels in access, enjoyment and utilization of school education by all school aged children. The movement aims to ensure transparency, accountability, and the practical realization of the right to education of children in Nepal. It operates as a loose alliance of civil society organizations, aiming to work within the framework of the right to education and the state's obligations.

The Education Watch campaign work to educate and enhance capacity of civil society, right holders and stakeholders; conduct monitoring and public communication on the status of right to education; promote solidarity and networking among rights based CSOs and people's movements on right to education; empower local level civil societies and children and youth to claim right to education through exercise of civic space.

Education Watch focuses on rights-based, empowerment-focused, critical, and constructive engagement approach to drive change in the education sector and ensure the practical realization of the right to education for all in Nepal.

Loo Niva Child Concern Group is the founding initiator, current convener and secretariat of Education Watch Group.

Introduction

Introduction

Culturally Nepali learnt to be duty bond person. *Niti Shlok* (moral verse) such as *mata shatru pita bairi ena balo napathita* (parents are enemy if they don't educate their children) is an example of it. This implies that right to education is a new approach to Nepal. It was introduced for the first time in the report of the NNEPC, 1956. This initiative has been reiterated in the succeeding policies and program. But who must be the guarantor of this children's right to education is not mentioned explicitly. A decade ago, the Constitution of Nepal (2015 article 31)



guarantees free and compulsory education up to the basic level (grades 1-8) and free education up to the secondary level (grades 9-12), underscoring the government's dedication to inclusive education. Local government was made accountable for it. This constitutional commitment is further reinforced by the Free and Compulsory Education Act (2018) and accompanying regulations (2020), which lay the groundwork for equitable access to education, especially for marginalized and disadvantaged communities. The bylaws for free and compulsory education have been drafted in 2022. But it is yet to be materialized. Besides, article 24 and 40 of the constitution of Nepal Dalits, disables and poorest of the poor are entitled to get right to free education up to higher education. As a sequel to it, ministry of education took initiative to launch Mid-Day Meal (Mdm) program, designed to enhance student attendance, retention, and learning outcomes. This program aligns with Article 31 of the Constitution, which guarantees free and compulsory basic education, and is legally mandated by Section 25 of the Free and Compulsory Education Act (2018) and Rule 22 of the Education Regulation (2020). Additionally, the program is supported by important national strategies such as the School Education Sector Plan (SESP), the Sixteenth Five-Year Plan, and the Integrated Health Strategy, all of which emphasize the role of school meals in promoting child development, improving educational access, and supporting public health. the Mid-Day Meal program was established with the core objective of ensuring

that every child is enrolled in school (SESP, 2022). In alignment with global goals such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Nepal has implemented numerous national plans, including the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) and the School Education Sector Plan (SESP), to improve access, retention, and quality in education.

In a notable recent step, the Government of Nepal introduced the "Framework of Nutritious School Mdm based on Local Production, 2081", which promotes the use of locally grown food in school meals. This move is expected to enhance the nutritional value of meals, ensure sustainability, support local farmers, and strengthen community participation in education.

Studies have shown that school meals significantly improve children's physical health, concentration, and learning outcomes, making them an essential component of a child's right to education (Tripathi, 2024; Bhattacharya et al., 2004). In line with these studies, this study assesses the current implementation status of the Mdm program, identify challenges and gaps, and offer recommendations for improving its effectiveness and sustainability in the Nepali context.

Global Context of the Mdm program

Around the world, schools are seen as a key place to help children develop healthy habits because students spend a large part of their day there (Langford et al., 2014). In many developed countries, school meal programs are a regular part of national policies to support children's health. These meals especially help students from low-income families by improving the quality of their diet and reducing food insecurity (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016).

Many countries have also established nutrition standards for school meals to ensure that children receive healthy and balanced diets believing that nutritious school meals play a crucial role in supporting children's physical growth, cognitive development, and in preventing malnutrition and obesity (Au et al., 2018). The concept of providing meals in schools has a long history; Finland was the first country to introduce a nationwide school meal program in 1943, followed by Sweden in 1945 (Pellikka et al., 2019). In more recent years, Estonia implemented universal free school meals in 2002, and South Korea followed

in 2011. In the United Kingdom, partial free meal policies are available for younger children in England and Scotland (The Education (Nutritional Standards and Requirements for School Food), 2008). Japan also runs a universal school meal program, though it is not entirely free families pay unless they qualify for financial assistance (Ishida, 2018). Back home in Nepal, we have religious schools such as Gurukul, Gumba and Madarasa. Gurukul and Gumba provide lodging and fooding facilities free of cost to the students. Madarasa usually provides midday meal. Private schools ask parents for their children's Mdm program. Public school did not have such provisions prior to the implementation of Mdm Program in 2008.

Global research highlights the strong positive impacts of school meal programs on students' nutritional as well as educational progress. For instance, Bangladesh increased school enrollment by 14.2% through Mdm program; similar trend was observed across 32 African countries (European Commission, 2013). In China, children receiving school meals showed improved health outcomes, such as higher hemoglobin levels, and better academic performance, especially in mathematics. In Nepal, a 2018 study found that children who received mid-day meals remained in school nearly one year longer than those who did not benefit from the program. Furthermore, Nepal's Mdm Program has shown significant economic returns, with every USD 1 invested yielding a return of USD 5.20 demonstrating its value not only in improving children's lives but also in contributing to national development.

In all, universal free school meals are linked to benefits like better student nutrition, higher attendance, and improved academic performance (Schwartz & Rothbart, 2020). However, concerns remain about their impact on student body weight and school budgets. While early research, especially from the U.S., shows positive trends, more global studies are needed to fully understand their effects (Cohen et al., 2021). This helps guide better school meal policies worldwide.

Historical Context

Nepal's education system has undergone significant transformation over the years. It originated with traditional forms of learning such as the Gurukul, Gumba and Madarasa system, which were largely spiritual and limited in reach. During the Rana regime (1846-1951), education was deliberately restricted to

the elite class, excluding the general population and reinforcing social hierarchies. However, the democratic movement of 1951 marked a turning point, leading to reforms that gradually expanded access to education. These efforts culminated in constitutional provisions guaranteeing free and compulsory education for all, reflecting a shift toward greater inclusivity.

The evolution of education in Nepal can be understood through five broad stages. Initially, education was seen as a classified right, accessible only to a select few. Students of Gurukul and Gumba are the examples of using this right. It then became a general economic right, where only those with financial means could afford education. Nepal witnessed this situation after the dawn of democracy in 1950. The third phase marked a political right, recognizing that everyone should have the opportunity to study. This was the case of the country up to 1980. The fourth level introduced the idea that education should be accessible to all, with infrastructure and policies supporting broader reach. It was so during 1981- 2014. Finally, the fifth stage emphasizes inspiration-based education, where those with the ability and motivation are empowered to teach and uplift others. This situation occurred only after the constitutional provisions for the right to education in 2015. Mdm program can be connected to the fourth and the fifth stage.

Policy Provisions and the Mid Day Meal Program

The Mid-Day Meal (Mdm) program in Nepal initially received support from the World Food Programme (WFP), focusing on food-insecure regions. Over time, it has expanded to reach a broader geographic area. By providing meals during school hours, the program aims to reduce classroom hunger, incentivize school attendance, and foster a more supportive learning environment. As highlighted by Chisala (2017), hunger and poverty not only undermine children's health and development but also limit their learning capacity and school participation.

Studies done under WFP on the Mdm program have shown positive impacts on school attendance and retention, particularly in poorer and marginalized communities. They also showed that children who receive regular meals at school tend to have better attendance rates, as it reduces the financial burden on families and ensures that students are not attending classes on empty stomachs. However, there are still challenges related to coverage and

implementation, as not all schools have the infrastructure to support meal preparation and distribution. Very recently, local government and I/NGOs have been supporting Mdm program in their own way.

In the federal structure of Nepal, provincial governments play an increasingly important role in shaping and implementing education policies that respond to regional needs and contexts. While the constitutional and federal frameworks provide the overarching guidelines, provinces are responsible for operationalizing these policies through strategic planning, budgeting, and oversight mechanisms. This includes crucial responsibilities in relation to school feeding initiatives such as the Mdm program, which serves as both an educational and nutritional intervention.

Several provinces have begun to incorporate the Mdm program into their broader education policies, recognizing its dual role in enhancing student health and increasing school attendance. For example, in Bagmati (Article 9. 13. 2 of Education policy of Bagmati Province, 2022) and Sudurpashchim provinces, where in-person consultations were conducted as part of this study provincial authorities have acknowledged the program's value in addressing socio-economic disparities and preventing early dropout, particularly among children from food-insecure households. These provinces have taken steps to allocate provincial resources to support the continuity of the Mdm program, often in collaboration with local governments and civil society organizations.

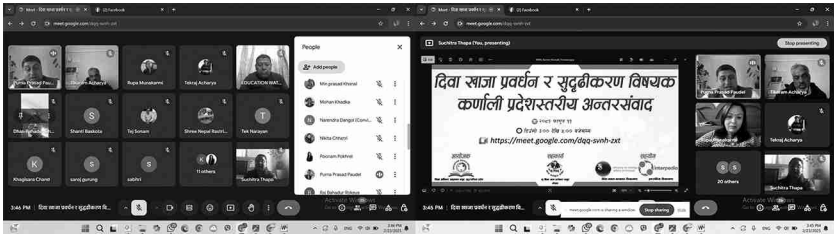
However, the development and implementation of provincial education policies remain uneven across the country. In many provinces, education ministries are still in the early stages of defining their roles under the federal system, and comprehensive policy frameworks addressing issues like school nutrition have not yet been formalized (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, while the Mdm program is frequently implemented at the school and municipal levels, provincial governments often lack dedicated mechanisms for monitoring program quality, ensuring consistent meal standards, or evaluating impact. This limits their ability to effectively support or scale up the program.

Coordination between the three tiers of government; federal, provincial, and local also presents a significant challenge. Provinces are expected to serve as intermediaries in education governance, yet unclear mandates and limited

technical capacity have led to gaps in oversight and accountability (UNICEF, 2020). These issues are particularly critical for programs like the Mdm, which require regular funding flows, supply chain management, and cross-sectoral coordination with agriculture, health, and child development departments. Despite these challenges, the provincial level holds great potential for strengthening the Mdm initiative as part of a holistic education policy. Provinces can play a key role in standardizing implementation practices, ensuring quality assurance, and integrating nutrition into broader strategies for inclusive and equitable education. Doing so will require not only greater intergovernmental collaboration but also sustained political commitment and investment in institutional capacity.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the multifaceted factors affecting the implementation of the Mdm program in Nepal. Qualitative design allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and local contexts of various stakeholders. Rather than focusing on numbers alone, this approach aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives of those directly involved in and affected by the education system.



Data was collected through a series of provincial consultation programs conducted in all the seven provinces of the country, with the support of local civil society organizations (CSOs). In Bagmati and Sudurpashchim provinces, the consultations took place in person. In the remaining five provinces, the consultations were conducted virtually due to logistical and contextual constraints. Despite the difference in format, both face-to-face and virtual consultations were designed to ensure meaningful participation, inclusive dialogue, and the collection of rich qualitative data from a wide range of stakeholders. Participants in these consultations were carefully selected based on their direct experience with the education system and the Mdm program. They included Provincial Education Department officials, local government representatives, civil society members, school teachers, students (particularly child club members), and parents. These individuals were able to provide firsthand insights into the challenges and opportunities within school governance, and the Mdm scheme. Each consultation typically involved 20 to 30 participants (the details is given in table 1).

The research employed several qualitative tools to gather data. Key informant interviews were conducted with officials from Provincial Education Departments, local governments, and civil society organizations to gather their views on policy implementation, operational challenges, and potential improvements. Focus group discussions were organized with teachers, students, and parents

to generate interactive dialogue and capture a range of opinions on how the Mdm program influences school attendance and student retention. The table below gives the number of virtually and the face to face involved participants.

Table 1: Number of consulted persons during the study

Participants	Municipal representatives	civil society members	Teachers	Students	Parents
Koshi	0	5	6	2	3
Madhesh	0	8	10	2	7
Bagmati	3	27	4	0	0
Gandaki	1	12	9	1	3
Lumbini	0	6	9	1	2
Karnali	0	10	3	0	2
Sudurpashchim	3	26	3	2	0
Total	7	94	44	8	17

To analyze the collected data, the study used thematic analysis. This involved coding responses to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories that emerged across interviews and discussions. A comparative analysis was also conducted across provinces and respondent groups to highlight variations in experiences and perspectives. This method of analysis was particularly well-suited to the perceptual nature of the research, allowing for a comprehensive and context-sensitive exploration of how governance, social factors, and the Mdm program collectively impact education outcomes across Nepal.

School Governance and the Realization of the Right to Education

Effective school governance is central to ensuring that all children in Nepal can access and complete quality education, as guaranteed under Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), for general people, article 41 especially for Dalit and disables which enshrines the right to free and compulsory basic education and free secondary education. Governance in schools refers to how decisions are made and implemented by School Management Committees (SMCs), local governments, and other stakeholders, especially in relation to infrastructure, planning, monitoring, and community engagement.

One of the critical areas where governance plays a role is in ensuring adequate physical facilities. Many public schools in Nepal continue to struggle with poor infrastructure, overcrowded, or unsafe classrooms, lack of gender-sensitive toilets, limited access to clean drinking water, and inadequate kitchens for mid-day meals. The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 highlights the need for improved infrastructure to support learning, particularly for girls and children from marginalized communities (MoE, 2016). However, in practice, many local governments and SMCs lack the resources and technical capacity to address these gaps effectively.



Demographic shifts further complicate the picture. Population dynamics, including migration, urbanization, and declining birth rates in more than 30 out of 77 districts, create unequal pressures on school systems. While schools in growing urban areas often become overcrowded, others in remote regions face under-enrollment,

sometimes leading to school mergers or closures. It is why the 8th Amendment to the Education Act (2016) entrusts local governments to restructure schools based on local needs (MoE, 2016). However, these decisions are not always made in a transparent or inclusive manner, and may not consider the full impact on children's access to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

In terms of guaranteeing the right to education, strong governance is essential for inclusive and equitable service delivery. Equally, the local government must ensure that children are enrolled in school and then not excluded based on gender, caste, disability, or socio-economic status. So, the National Framework for Child-Friendly Schools (2010) emphasizes participatory governance and the need for child-centered school environments (MoE, 2010). However, barriers remain, including weak community engagement and inconsistent enforcement of child-friendly and inclusive practices.

The Mdm Program, guided by the School Meal Programme Operating Guidelines (2017), is considered as a critical intervention for promoting student enrollment, attendance, and retention, while also supporting children's nutrition. Governance structures at the school and local levels are responsible for implementing this program, including food procurement, meal preparation, and monitoring. Despite the clear policy framework, there are ongoing challenges such as funding delays, irregular supply chains, and quality control issues all of which reduce the reliability of the program and its impact on education outcomes.



Effectiveness of the Mid Day Meal Program: Findings from Provincial Consultation

The consultation in Seven Provinces of Nepal brought together educators, local government representatives, parents, and civil society members to reflect on the Mdm program. As part of the study, the team also visited schools and spoke directly with teachers, parents, and government representatives in Bagmati and Sudurpaschim Provinces to understand how the program is working on the ground. On the basis of the information obtained, effectiveness parameters have been prepared and discussed as per the succeeding paragraphs:

1. Effect of Mdm on Student Enrollment

The Mdm program has driven a notable rise in school enrollment across Nepal's diverse regions. In Bagmati Province, parents who once kept children at home for chores now send them to school regularly, drawn by the promise of a daily meal that eases household burdens to the children. Further west in Sudurpaschim, free school lunches have similarly encouraged families especially in low-income and marginalized communities to enroll their children, with girls' enrollment showing a marked uptick. In the hill districts of Gandaki Province, stakeholders observed that combining meals with community-based agricultural activities makes schooling more appealing, while in remote districts of Karnali Province, where food insecurity is acute, parents report sending their children to school primarily to ensure they receive at least one solid meal each day.

Balancing Challenges and Local Innovation in Mid-Day Meals: Insights from Bardiya, Sindhuli and districts from Karnali

One of HTs highlighted a contradictory reality of the Mdm Program. He stated the positive impact on student well-being and attendance is undeniable but delays in government payments have created operational challenges. "Children are happy and regular to school because of mid day meal," he shared, emphasizing how the meal program has become a source of motivation for learners. He noted that the allocated Rs. 15 per student may be sufficient in some districts like Bardiya, where costs are manageable, but falls short in geographically challenging and high-cost districts of Karnali Province. "The amount should be fixed based on the market value of each region," he stressed, suggesting a more flexible funding model that reflects local realities.

A head teacher from Sindhuli offered another promising example. "We provide lunch made from locally available ingredients. This is exemplary." This local adaptation not only reduces costs but also supports community farmers and respects cultural food practices, demonstrating how innovation at the grassroots level can enhance the effectiveness of national programs.

In the eastern Koshi Province, areas like Itahari Metropolitan have seen higher attendance as students from vulnerable backgrounds arrive consistently for the meal and stay for classes. Down in Lumbini Province, educators note that the assurance of food removes a key barrier for underprivileged families—one headteacher succinctly put it, "Programs like the mid-day meal increase student enrollment." Similarly, in the plains of Madhesh Province, schools such as Janta S.S. and Jan Chetana S.S. report stronger enrollment among Dalit, Janajati, and other marginalized groups, underlining the program's role in bridging educational access gaps for Nepal's most vulnerable children.

A teacher (Madesh) shared, "The students in our public schools are mostly those who cannot afford private care. In this context, the provision of mid-day meals has been a great support, it has led to very high student attendance."

During the study team's visit to a model school in Dhangadhi, Sudurpaschim Province, teachers shared that the Mdm program has helped attract more students to the school. The team observed the program in action and saw that meals were being prepared and served with care. On that day, students were enjoying meal (chick peas with *bhujija*), and the food was served in generous portions. Teachers, even during their free periods, were actively involved in helping the kitchen staff prepare and distribute the meals. However, the teacher in charge of the Mdm program mentioned that it's often difficult to manage both teaching duties and meal responsibilities. To ensure students are fed, teachers on break time step in to support meal preparation. Another concern raised was the lack of proper facilities for students to wash their hands, clean their lunchboxes, and do the dishes highlighting a need for basic infrastructure to support hygiene and efficiency in the program.

2. Effect of Mdm on Retention of Students

The Mdm program has made a big difference in helping students stay in school across Nepal. In many places, like Bagmati Province, schools have seen better attendance and fewer dropouts. For many children, especially younger ones, the promise of a daily meal makes them excited to come to school even without being pushed by their parents.



For families who struggle financially, the program also takes away the stress of having to pack lunch every day. One teacher from Sindhuli, Bagmati Province,

shared, "I've seen older students come to school without food and even faint during assembly." In such cases, the school provides food to those students. In one school, even the teachers eat lunch together with the students, helping create a friendly and equal environment. However, some challenges still exist. There are concerns about the quality and hygiene of meals, the workload on teachers who help prepare food, and the lack of proper facilities for washing hands and dishes. In some localities of Sudurpaschim Province, especially of rural areas where food at home is not always guaranteed, the daily school meal plays a big role in keeping children in school. It gives them a strong reason to attend every day and finish the school year.

In Gandaki Province, the program's impact on retention has been particularly notable, with 53 schools in Modi Rural Municipality benefiting from structured meal systems. This routine has helped create a sense of commitment and consistency among students. The regular availability of meals is crucial for those in marginalized communities, as the meal often serves as the main incentive for continued attendance. In Karnali Province, the program has also proven to be a lifeline for retention, particularly for students whose parents struggle to provide meals at home. However, challenges like delayed budget releases and infrastructure constraints can disrupt meal services and hinder the program's full potential.

Koshi Province has similarly seen improved retention, especially in remote areas where food insecurity is a major barrier to regular school attendance. The assurance of a meal has motivated students to attend more regularly, though issues like rural migration and logistical difficulties can still cause irregular attendance in some regions. In Lumbini Province, the Mdm program plays a crucial role in student retention, particularly when managed consistently with proper oversight. The social aspect of communal eating also fosters a positive school environment, further encouraging students to stay enrolled. A suggestion from the region advocates for extending the program to include higher grades, as this would provide further incentive for students to remain in school beyond the primary level.

Madhesh Province has reported one of the most widely observed effects of the program: a significant reduction in dropout rates and an increase in regular attendance. Schools like Bodh Bal Mandir in Dhanusha have shared that the consistent provision of meals has helped retain students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. The meals not only provide essential nutrition but also serve as an emotional and psychological incentive for students to stay engaged with their education. This highlights the broader role of the Mdm program in supporting student retention across diverse contexts.

3. Effect of Mdm on Educational Achievement

Although systematic data on learning outcomes is limited, consultations across seven provinces point to a positive influence of the Mdm program on educational achievement. In Bagmati Province, teachers note that better-nourished children arrive more alert and participatory in class, even as they call for formal studies to confirm these observations. In Sudurpaschim Province, reduced hunger-related distractions have similarly led to increased focus and energy during lessons. Gandaki Province's "learning and earning" agriculture programs further strengthen this link by combining hands-on skills with classroom engagement, fostering critical thinking alongside improved nutrition. In remote districts of Karnali Province, educators report that students who receive a reliable meal are happier, more punctual, and better prepared to learn though erratic funding and infrastructure issues can interrupt these gains. In Koshi Province, the extra energy from mid-day meals helps students sustain concentration, even as low-nutrient menu items sometimes limit the program's full academic benefit. Lumbini Province stakeholders stress that when meals are well-prepared and sufficient, classroom environments become noticeably more conducive to learning, but inadequate provisions leave hungry children struggling to stay attentive. Finally, in Madhesh Province, the stability of regular attendance driven by meal provision underpins a more engaging learning atmosphere, although the dual burden on teachers who often juggle cooking and instruction can undermine teaching quality.

An education expert stated:

"If there is no human resource but sufficient funding, the local government should take responsibility for managing the Mdm. In some areas, students themselves are involved in agricultural production, which has helped schools become self-sufficient in providing meals. This practice not only sustains the program but also instills valuable agro-based life skills in students."

4. Effect of Mdm on Students' Nutrition Level

The Mdm program has markedly improved students' nutritional status across Nepal's provinces. In Bagmati Province, children are now less inclined to consume junk food during school hours, with many schools enhancing meal quality by incorporating home-grown vegetables from kitchen gardens. Changes that parents say have boosted their children's health and energy levels. Sudurpaschim Province consultations echoed these

A CSO member from Sunsari district shared that in 12 districts of Koshi Province, the Mdm program is functioning well. He highlighted that "Itahari Metropolitan has allocated additional Rs. 32 per student per day for the program, which has significantly helped promote day meals, especially among poorer communities. For students in Grades 1 to 5, the program has proven to be very effective both geographically and culturally." However, he also raised concerns about misuse of the money allotted for Mdm in some schools: "In a few cases, schools have been using the funds to buy junk food, which goes against the goal of improving children's nutrition. Local governments are not monitoring this closely enough."

gains, noting that locally sourced ingredients and improved hygiene practices, such as regular handwashing before meals, have helped ensure a more balanced diet. In Gandaki Province, dedicated funding in areas like Kaski and Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality has driven regular, nutritious meal provision, although budget constraints sometimes

One of the child club members shared, "In our school in Banke district, many students are Muslim, and during fasting period i. e. Roza/Ramadan/Ramdan, they don't eat during the day. Even on regular days, they're used to having a heavy breakfast at home. But the mid-day meal provided at school is quite light, and not enough to fill us, they said. When our stomachs are empty, it's really hard to focus on learning."

force compromises on food quality. Karnali Province schools have pioneered the use of organic staples millet, buckwheat, nettle powder, and even local meats like churpi (milk product) to enrich meals, but the universal Rs. 15 allocation and untimely fund releases still hinder consistency. In Koshi Province, efforts to source locally are undercut by students' preference for puffed rice and other low-nutrient snacks, and the use of "maida" in some hostel menus has even led to health complaints. Lumbini Province faces similar funding and management challenges, though municipalities like Janaki Rural Municipality

in Banke have demonstrated that creative menu planning can deliver nutritious meals within tight budgets.

Finally, in Madhesh Province, while the program guarantees at least one daily meal and has improved basic nutritional intake, the Rs. 15 per child rate remains insufficient for meeting dietary standards, making local adaptations crucial for sustaining child health and development.

CC Network member stated "Maida (refined flour) is being served in large quantities in school hostel meals. Despite several complaints from students about stomachaches, no action has been taken to improve the food quality."

5. Effect of Mdm in Guaranteeing the Right to Education

The Mdm program has become a vital for upholding every child's right to education across Nepal's provinces by removing hunger as a barrier to attendance and learning. In Bagmati Province, schools have begun educating students about their entitlement to free school meals, fostering a sense of agency and awareness that empowers families to demand consistent, quality education services. In Sudurpaschim Province, the program's daily meals not only ease the financial burden on poor households but also catalyze broader community involvement. Parents and local leaders actively support meal preparation, reinforcing school as a place of care and inclusion.

In Gandaki Province, stakeholders highlight how the assurance of nutrition has translated into steady school attendance for underprivileged children, helping realize the constitutional guarantee of free and compulsory education. Similarly, in remote districts of Karnali Province, children whose parents work far from

home rely on the Mdm for sustenance and therefore for the very opportunity to learn underscoring the program's role in safeguarding the right to schooling even in the harshest environments.

Koshi Province has seen the meals act as an incentive for families in isolated communities, while Lumbini Province reports that offering a reliable lunch each day removes a key obstacle for marginalized groups-though local political interference and weak oversight sometimes threaten these gains for regular supervision and monitoring of the Mdm program. Finally, in Madhesh Province, the daily meal serves as both nutritional support and a powerful motivator for Dalit, Janajati, and other marginalized children to remain in school. Across all seven provinces, by guaranteeing at least one nutritious meal, the Mdm program strengthens children's claim to education and lays the groundwork for equitable, right-based schooling nationwide.

Disparity in Mid-Day Meal Costs

In Lumbini Province, teachers shared mixed experiences regarding the sufficiency of the budget allocated for the Mdm program. One teacher noted, "The mid-day meal program is very effective in encouraging enrollment. If managed well, the current rate of Rs. 15 per student is enough to provide a decent meal." This suggests that in some urban or semi-urban parts of Lumbini Province, where food items are more accessible and cost less, the program is running smoothly within the budget. However, another teacher from a more remote area of the same province pointed out a significant challenge: "The same rate doesn't work everywhere. While Rs. 15 might be sufficient in cities, in remote districts it's not enough to feed students properly." This highlights a key equity issue in implementing the Mdm program-uniform budgeting fails to account for local context, especially in geographically and economically diverse regions like Lumbini Province. The cost of food and transportation in remote areas is higher, making it difficult to ensure nutritious meals within the current allocation. The program risks reinforcing inequalities rather than addressing them without adjusting for these local differences.

Reflection over Perceived and Statistical Testimonies

Though this is a qualitative study, we have tried to compare and contrast the perceived testimonies with the secondary data of all the seven provinces of the country. The data were obtained from the flash report, UNICEF, Nasa (2020), and National Census (2021).

Table 2: Educational progress in statistics

Province	Enrolment (class 1-5) (Census, 2021)	Completion rate of primary level (UNICEF)	Dropouts	Educational achievements (National average 483, 2020 NASA)
Koshi	489046	85%	6%	472
Madhesh	697109	63%	6%	Below national average
Bagmati	507674	93%	5%	509

Gandaki	221537	96%	5%	497
Lumbini	557392	79%	5%	485
Karnali	216721	83%	9%	Below national average
Sudurpaschhim	331270	84%	5%	Below national average
Total	3020749			

The table 2 shows out of 100 students enrolled in grade one, 36 students leave their study by the time they reach grade 10. "The retention rate till grade 10 is 64.6 percent," the report shows.

Voices from Child Club Members: Gaps in Inclusion, Nutrition, and Monitoring

Swastika Poudel, a child club member from Koshi Province, raised important concerns about the inclusivity and implementation of the Mdm program. She pointed out that "Children living in child rehabilitation centers are not receiving mid-day meals. Who is responsible for this, and how can it be ensured that all children benefit equally? What plans does the government have to include them?" She asked and also highlighted irregularities in school participation: "Most schools do not provide mid-day meals on Fridays, and hygiene management in many cases is very poor. In some places, children are only served puffed rice, which is not nutritious." Similarly, Sunjari Limbu, a student at Nabin Shikshya Sadan in Tehrathum, shared that "Some students faint during school hours due to not having enough to eat. Despite the mid-day meal program, junk foods like chatpatey (mixture of junk foods) and artificially colored snacks are widely consumed within school premises. There is a serious need for monitoring and regulation to control this."

The note taker mentioned in her diary that these voices from students reflect critical implementation gaps in the Mdm program, especially around inclusion, food quality, and hygiene. Special attention is needed to ensure that all children, including those in child rehabilitation centers, receive nutritious meals. Moreover, stricter guidelines and enforcement are required to prevent the distribution and consumption of junk food within schools, safeguarding health and learning capacity of students.

The repetition rate in primary level (Grade1-5) of Nepal is 8.7% in which 9.1% are girls while 8.4% are boys. This macro perspective does not tally with the perceived information that was generated during the field work. It indicates couple of things: one, informants gave their observation by looking at the neighboring localities which might have different story to tell; two, the informants exaggerated their saying to be politically correct to the data collector who were basically from Loo Niva; three, they want to please the data collector in a hope that Loo Niva will be at their proximity with its support program. It also indicates the need of mixed method study whereby one can see the commonality and the differences between the hard and the soft data prior to go for the effect of Loo Niva's program.

6. Problems and Challenges of Mdm

The Mdm program faces several challenges in its implementation across Nepal's provinces, despite its positive impacts. For example, in Koshi Province, inadequate

funding forces schools to rely on low-quality, low-nutrient food options, while students' preference for junk food complicates efforts to promote healthier eating habits. Poor monitoring and geographical barriers also contribute to the inconsistency in meal quality, with logistical challenges and high transportation costs exacerbating the problem.

In Madhesh Province, the most significant issues include inadequate funding, with Rs. 15 per child per meal being insufficient to meet nutritional requirements. Infrastructure limitations, such as the lack of proper kitchen facilities, further complicate the delivery of meals. The absence of dedicated staff to prepare meals means that teachers often bear this responsibility, disrupting their primary educational duties. Irregular meal delivery, particularly on Fridays, and inconsistent meal quality are also pressing concerns. Social challenges, such as increasing junk food consumption and behavioral issues at home, market, and the community, further complicate the program's impact, highlighting the need for complementary health and awareness initiatives.

Shankar (teacher of Sitapur School) stated, "The quality of food served is questionable, and there is no separate kitchen area for the basic schools. We have only four rooms, and the staff are forced to manage both cooking and teaching at the same time."

Additionally, competition from private schools in Madhesh Province has led to decreased retention rates in public schools. The Mdm program, though helpful, is not sufficient on its own to retain students in the face of this growing competition. Expanding and strengthening the program could offer public schools a stronger incentive for families when considering educational options.

In Bagmati Province, one of the primary issues is the insufficient budget allocated by both federal and local governments. This often results in limiting meal provision to lower grades (usually up to grade 5 or 6), leading to inequalities between younger and older students. Many schools lack essential infrastructure such as proper kitchen facilities and trained cooks, which, combined with the irregular release of funds, creates inconsistencies in meal quality and availability. Additionally, weak monitoring and resource constraints in rural areas exacerbate these problems.

In Gandaki Province, the challenges include insufficient per-child funding, which forces schools to resort to serving junk food or even providing cash instead of meals. This diminishes the nutritional value of the program. Furthermore, the lack of proper infrastructure and weak monitoring contribute to inconsistent delivery and quality, particularly in municipalities with limited resources.

Lumbini Province has a range of opportunities for improvement, including stronger parental and community involvement, which can reduce the logistical burden on schools and improve meal quality. The potential for collaboration with NGOs, community-based organizations, and private stakeholders offers a path to address resource gaps and enhance the program's impact. However, the current challenges of political interference, weak monitoring, and infrastructure limitations undermine the program's full potential.

Karnali Province faces similar issues, with inadequate funding, delayed budget releases, and lack of essential infrastructure. The informants there unanimously said that Rs. 15 per child allocation is insufficient, especially in remote areas, and there is variability in meal management due to the reliance on local government funds, which are often delayed or insufficient. Coordination among local governments remains a significant challenge, further hindering the program's effectiveness. In Sudurpaschim Province, a shortage of trained cooks and inadequate compensation for staff is a major concern. Schools often rely on volunteers, which impacts the quality of meal preparation. Delays in budget releases also disrupt meal services, affecting student attendance. Moreover, the inclusion of unhealthy food in some schools undermines the nutritional goals of the program, and the lack of effective documentation and reporting makes it difficult to monitor and improve the program's reach and quality.

Overall, the Mdm program faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of funding, infrastructure, and consistent delivery. Below is the table that depicts province specific major challenges at a glance. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving the program's effectiveness and ensuring it reaches its full potential in enhancing both educational outcomes and student nutrition across Nepal.

Table 3: Challenges faced for the effective implementation of mid day meal

Province	Challenges
Koshi	Inadequate funding; low-quality nutrient food options, junk food preference of students; poor monitoring and geographical barriers
Madhesh	Insufficient budget to meet nutritional requirements; lack of proper kitchen facilities; increased junk food consumption
Bagmati	Insufficient budget allocated by both federal and local governments; irregular release of funds; weak monitoring
Gandaki	Insufficient per-child funding; weak monitoring; lack of proper infrastructure
Lumbini	Political interference, weak monitoring, and infrastructure limitations
Karnali	Inadequate funding, delayed budget releases, and lack of essential infrastructure
Sudurpaschim	Shortage of trained cooks; delays in budget release

The table 2 reiterates that insufficient funding has been the major challenge followed by the weak monitoring, inadequate infrastructure facilities, and release of the fund in a timely manner. However, there were rays of hopes of creative funding, volunteer cooking system and municipality support.

7. Opportunities Offered by the Mdm Program

The Mdm across Nepal's provinces present significant opportunities for enhancing both educational and community development.

In Koshi Province, community engagement remains a key strength of the Mdm program. Parents actively participate in meal preparation, improving food quality and contributing to the program's long-term sustainability. Additionally, integrating locally grown food staples such as millet and buckwheat helps reduce procurement costs while enhancing nutritional value. These efforts also support local farmers

and create a self-sustaining model for the program. Increased student participation, particularly in high-poverty areas, demonstrates the program's effectiveness in keeping children in school.

The Madhesh Province faces significant challenges but also offers substantial opportunities. The Mdm program acts as a vital social safety net for vulnerable students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families by reducing absenteeism and encouraging regular attendance. Greater involvement from parents, local leaders, and rural municipalities can improve the quality and cultural appropriateness of meals, fostering a more sustainable and accountable program. Policy-level advocacy for increased funding, better infrastructure, and structured monitoring mechanisms could catalyze improvements in program delivery. Local adaptation models, like those seen in Janaki Rural Municipality (see case of JRM), showcase creative solutions to meet nutritional needs within budget constraints, offering valuable insights for broader implementation across the province.

Case of JRM: Nutritious Meals on a Limited Budget

Janaki Rural Municipality (JRM) in Banke has shown that it is possible to provide healthy and nutritious school meals even with a small budget. During our consultation, many people praised Janaki's creative approach to the Mdm program. Schools in JRM plan their meals carefully and use local, seasonal ingredients. This helps keep costs low while still offering tasty and nutritious food to children. By buying food from nearby farmers, they also support the local economy. The success of the program is also due to strong community support. Parents, school staff, and local leaders work together to monitor the food and make sure the program runs well. This teamwork has made the program more transparent and sustainable. JRM's example shows that with smart planning and local cooperation, schools across the province can also improve the quality of meals for children, even with limited funds.

In Bagmati Province, community engagement is growing, with mothers' groups, farmers' collectives, and child clubs playing an active role in contributing food, labor, and monitoring the program. This involvement not only strengthens local ownership but also supports the local economy by sourcing fresh agricultural products for school meals. Additionally, some schools are exploring cooperative models and school-run enterprises to ensure the program's sustainability. The program also serves as a platform for promoting health education and civic engagement among students and families, which could have long-term benefits for both education and nutrition.

Gandaki Province presents opportunities to integrate agriculture-based "learning and earning" models to support sustainability and improve the program's impact. Strengthening intergovernmental coordination, improving community-based management, and expanding the program to higher grades could increase equitable access and provide long-term benefits for students. Provincial-level policy guidelines could help streamline the program's implementation, ensuring better outcomes across the region.

The Mdm Program in Lumbini Province offers significant opportunities to strengthen the education system and support children's overall development. From the consultation, the participants said that it has helped increase school enrollment and reduce dropout rates, especially among economically disadvantaged children, while also creating a positive environment through group meals that promote socialization and inclusivity. The program demonstrates the potential to improve children's nutrition, as seen in Janaki Rural Municipality, where creative use of available funds allowed schools to provide nutritious meals. Schools have shown that with community engagement and innovative practices, such as sourcing local foods, the program can be made more sustainable and beneficial. Furthermore, the involvement of other organizations can expand the program's impact, supporting not only meals but also broader areas like hygiene and nutrition education.

The Mdm Program in Karnali Province presents important opportunities for improving children's enrollment, attendance, and well-being, especially for those from vulnerable backgrounds. Insights gathered from province-wise consultations highlight that the program has helped children who often come to school hungry, encouraging their regular attendance and enhancing learning outcomes. Opportunities exist to further strengthen the program by promoting the use of locally available, organic foods like millet, buckwheat, barley, and corn, making meals more nutritious and supporting local farmers. Engaging small land holder farmers and cooperatives can create a sustainable food

sourcing model and strengthen the local economy. Creative funding models, such as parental matching where possible, and community involvement in meal preparation through teachers, parents, and students offer new ways to ensure sustainability. According to the participants, if these community-driven and locally adapted approaches are supported, the Mdm program can significantly contribute to better child nutrition, education, and grassroots economic development in Karnali Province.

During the Key Informant Interview (KII) with a government official in Sudurpaschim Province, a comprehensive plan for strengthening the Mdm Program was reported. Although not yet fully implemented, the plan outlines several activities designed to improve the quality, sustainability, and impact of the program. One major component of the plan is the introduction of a Central Kitchen Model in Dhangadhi Metropolitan City. Under this model, meals would be prepared in a centralized kitchen equipped with proper facilities for maintaining hygiene and nutrition standards and then distributed to various schools. This approach aims to ensure consistency in meal quality, improve food safety, and make the management of meals more efficient through economies of scale. Another key element of the plan is to strengthen local agriculture by sourcing fresh ingredients from nearby farms. This would not only ensure fresher and more nutritious meals for students but also support local farmers, encourage sustainable agricultural practices, and contribute to the local economy. The plan also emphasizes creating livelihood opportunities for women by involving them in the preparation and distribution of meals. This would promote women's economic empowerment and community participation. Additionally, positive behavioral change among students is a targeted outcome, with a focus on improving hygiene practices and encouraging healthier eating habits. Increasing parental and community involvement is another activity outlined in the plan. By actively engaging parents in monitoring and supporting the mid-day meal program, the aim is to build stronger accountability mechanisms and ensure long-term sustainability. Overall, this planned approach envisions a more structured, community-driven, and child-centered Mdm program in Sudurpaschim Province, although it is still in the early stages of development and implementation with the risk of delivery in time. Overall, the Mdm program holds immense potential for community development, educational enhancement, and local economic growth. Leveraging community engagement, local agriculture, and sustainable models can ensure the program's long-term success, provided there is stronger coordination, adequate funding, and improved infrastructure.

Discussion: Interpreting the Findings

Mid-Day Meals as a Catalyst for Inclusive and Sustained Learning

Following the perceptions of the consulted persons' perceptions, the Mdm program in Nepal has emerged as more than just a nutritional intervention, it is a transformative educational equalizer, particularly for children from marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities. By ensuring that one basic need i.e. hunger is addressed within the school environment, the program is dismantling long-standing barriers to access, retention, and learning for the country's most vulnerable students (Cohen et al., 2021).

Across the provinces, the Mdm program has directly influenced school enrollment, with parents increasingly citing the availability of meals as a decisive factor in enrolling their children. In regions like Madhesh, Bagmati, and Sudurpaschim, this trend is especially pronounced among girls and children from Dalit and Janajati communities, whose education is often deprioritized due to cultural and economic constraints (MoEST, 2023). The assurance of a daily meal, according to the perceived responses, not only eases the financial burden on families but also legitimizes school as a space of care and opportunity, thereby reinforcing education as a right rather than a luxury.

Beyond enrollment, the Mdm program plays a vital role in student retention. In remote and food-insecure areas such as Karnali, for instance, schools report that the provision of regular meals is a significant factor in preventing dropouts. In Gandaki's Modi Rural Municipality, the implementation of structured meal systems has introduced routine and reliability into students' lives, reinforcing school attendance as a daily habit. Teachers across provinces including in Lumbini and Madhesh emphasize that the knowledge of receiving a meal at school not only motivates students to attend regularly but also contributes to their emotional well-being, creating a more stable and engaged student body. Studies indicate that children who participate in the program show notable improvement in their cognitive performance (Nida & Sari, 2023).

Moreover, the Mdm program's influence extends into the classroom learning environment, though this area remains less systematically documented. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students who are well-fed are more attentive, participatory, and cognitively prepared to engage in lessons. Teachers from Karnali, Bagmati, and Koshi provinces consistently observe improved concentration and classroom behavior linked to meal provision. In Gandaki Province, an innovative approach has been planned to link the Mdm program with local agriculture through a "Learning and Earning" model. In some schools

that run technical and vocational education and training (TVET) classes, students are given the opportunity to practice farming on school land. The crops they grow are sold, and the money earned is used to help prepare the mid-day meals for students. Any additional income supports the students' education costs. This model not only makes the mid-day meal program more sustainable but also teaches students important farming and business skills. It connects learning directly to real-life practice, encourages self-reliance, and strengthens the link between education, agriculture, and nutrition.

However, the program's potential to fully enhance educational outcomes is occasionally compromised by systemic limitations. In provinces like Koshi and Madhesh, low-nutrient food options such as cheurabhujia (puffed rice) and Maida (refined flour) products undermine the intended nutritional and cognitive benefits of the program. Only a small number of community schools make sure that students eat healthy meals at school and continue good eating habits at home (Ghimire, 2024). Furthermore, dual responsibilities placed on teachers, who often juggle both instructional and meal preparation duties, strain educational quality and dilute the academic benefits of the program.

Hence, the Mdm program serves as a foundational pillar for inclusive, sustained, and meaningful education in Nepal. By addressing immediate needs like hunger, it lays the groundwork for broader educational transformation enhancing not only access and attendance but also the capacity for effective learning. To maximize its impact, continued efforts must be made to improve nutritional quality, invest in dedicated kitchen staff, and integrate the program more strategically with pedagogical goals and community-based initiatives.

Nutrition Equity and Local Food Sovereignty

The Mdm program plays a key role in addressing child malnutrition in Nepal, particularly in food-insecure regions like Karnali and Sudurpaschim. Encouraging healthy eating habits can help shape positive attitudes and values in students (Ahmadi & Black, 2015). By using local, culturally relevant foods such as millet, nettle, and buckwheat, the program supports both nutrition and indigenous food systems (FAO, 2021). This aligns with food sovereignty principles that emphasize local control and sustainability.

However, the uniform allocation of Rs. 15 per child per meal across all provinces fails to account for regional disparities in food cost and availability. In provinces like Madhesh and Gandaki, this has led to lower meal quality and a shift toward cash transfers—an approach that often fails to ensure children receive nutritious meals at home (UNICEF, 2022; MoEST, 2023).

Despite these challenges, community-driven models show promise. Koshi's farm-to-school sourcing, Bagmati's school gardens, and Sudurpaschim's centralized kitchens demonstrate how the program can support nutrition-sensitive agriculture and local economies (MoEST, 2023). These initiatives reflect intersectional and equity-based approaches that respond to local needs and context (Crenshaw, 1991). To maximize impact, the Mdm program requires context-sensitive budgeting, technical support, and stronger coordination across education, health, and agriculture sectors advancing Nepal's broader goals of child well-being and food sovereignty (NPC, 2022).

Mdm program and Its Impact on the Right to Education

The Mdm program in Nepal directly advances the constitutional and international right to education by addressing hunger as a barrier to school attendance and learning. Under Article 31 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), every citizen is entitled to free and compulsory basic education and free secondary education (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Internationally, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the right to free primary education, while Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges states to make school discipline and attendance conditional on access to essential services, including nutrition (Muedini, n.d.). By guaranteeing at least one nutritious meal per day, the Mdm program removes a key economic and social barrier, helping translate these legal commitments into lived realities for children.

Evidence from Bagmati, Sudurpaschim, Karnali, and Madhesh Province shows that school meals increase enrollment and reduce dropout rates, particularly for marginalized groups such as Dalit, Janajati, and girls, who often face layered social and economic barriers (MoEST, 2023). It also shows that the program's role in easing household food insecurity encourages regular attendance and supports gender equity in education. This effect is particularly pronounced for girls, who face compounded social constraints; by easing household food burdens, Mdm supports their right to education on an equal footing with boys. Beyond mere attendance, the Mdm program fosters a learning environment aligned with the Incheon Declaration's call for "inclusive, equitable quality education" as part of SDG 4 (UNESCO, 2015). Well-nourished children are more alert, focused, and participatory in class, enabling them to exercise their right not only to be present in school but to benefit fully from quality instruction. Moreover, by creating a shared space for communal meals, Mdm promotes social inclusion, helping break down caste- and class-based divides and advancing the broader right to an education that is not only free but truly equitable and empowering.

Diverse Approaches in Implementing the Mid-Day Meal Program

The Mdm program is being implemented in varied ways across different schools and regions. Broadly, three patterns have emerged: one, utilization as provided; two, creative and contextual implementation; and three, simplified and less nutritious options.

Utilization as Provided: In many schools across Provinces, the allocated funds (Rs.15 per child) are spent directly on meals without additional planning or innovation. Meals are prepared according to what the amount allows, meeting the minimum requirement.

Creative and Contextual Implementation: Some schools have gone beyond basic compliance by creatively utilizing local resources, involving NGOs, communities, and preparing nutritious meals using locally available ingredients. This approach reflects ownership, innovation, and a commitment to making the program more effective and sustainable.

Simplified and Less Nutritious Options: In certain cases, the meal is reduced to fast food items or the cash is simply handed over to parents or students, resulting in less nutritious outcomes. This practice undermines the intended goals of the program and raises concerns about monitoring and accountability.

Linking Perceptions and Evidence with Statistic

The Mdm program in Nepal has emerged as a critical intervention for promoting educational access, retention, and equity, particularly among marginalized populations. The qualitative data gathered through field consultations across seven provinces underscore the program's perceived benefits in enhancing enrollment, reducing dropouts, improving nutrition, and strengthening the right to education. However, when juxtaposed with statistical data from sources such as the 2021 Census, UNICEF, and NASA (2020), the alignment between perception and macro-level trends is uneven, indicating a complex interplay of local realities, structural limitations, and policy implementation gaps.

From a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to education (UNESCO, 2007), the Mdm program acts as a tangible mechanism for realizing children's rights, especially the right to adequate food and free, compulsory basic education. Community-level narratives frequently reflect this, describing the program as a lifeline for children in food-insecure areas and as a gateway to learning. The program reduces both direct and opportunity costs of schooling for poor households, reinforcing Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1993), which positions education not just as a tool for individual advancement but as a fundamental freedom that enhances one's capacity to lead a life of value.

Statistical data, however, offer a more nuanced view. Provinces such as Bagmati and Gandaki show higher completion rates and above-average educational achievement (UNICEF, 2021; NASA, 2020), somewhat aligning with stakeholder perceptions of successful Mdm implementation. Conversely, provinces like Madhesh and Karnali, despite strong qualitative testimonies about Mdm's positive role, continue to lag behind in terms of completion rates, dropout rates, and academic achievement. This disjuncture could be attributed to spatial and structural inequalities (Bourdieu, 1977), where deep-rooted socio-economic barriers, such as caste discrimination, poverty, and rural isolation, persistently limit educational outcomes regardless of school-based interventions.

Moreover, the social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) helps explain the Mdm program's community-level impact. In some provinces, particularly Sudurpaschim and Gandaki, the program has catalyzed increased parental involvement, strengthened trust in schools, and enhanced the perception of education as a collective good. This social cohesion, while not immediately reflected in macro indicators, contributes to longer-term cultural shifts towards valuing education.

Yet, the reliance on teachers for meal preparation and supervision, as reported widely in field visits, reflects a policy design gap, where the program risks compromising instructional quality. This aligns with implementation theory (Lipsky, 1980), which posits that teachers often face contradictions between policy intent and practical constraints, ultimately shaping how the program functions on the ground.

The divergence between qualitative accounts and quantitative indicators also raises questions about data validity and interpretation. As the reflection section notes, some informants may have overstated the program's benefits either due to localized improvements, social desirability bias, or a perceived need to secure external support from organizations like Loo Niva. This highlights the need for mixed-method research that can bridge the depth of lived experiences with the breadth of statistical generalizability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Conclusion

The finding helps conclude that Mdm program in Nepal must be recognized and strengthened not simply as a welfare intervention, but as a legal and structural instrument for advancing children's right to education. Its success in bringing children, particularly girls, Dalits, Janajatis, and those from low-income families into classrooms, and keeping them there, affirms that addressing hunger is not peripheral to education, but central to its realization.

However, if Nepal is to meet its constitutional and international obligations under the right to education, this study also enabled to conclude that Mdm program must shift from a "one-size-fits-all" model to a more context-specific and equity-focused policy framework. The current uniform per-child meal allocation undermines both nutritional goals and the quality of education in disadvantaged regions. Without immediate reforms in budgeting, staffing, and inter-sectoral coordination, the program risks entrenching inequality rather than correcting it.

The discussion over the findings help conclude that concrete action is now required meaning that the government must adopt a differentiated budget model that accounts for local food prices and logistical challenges; institutionalize community-led innovations as policy, not exception; and ensure that every school has trained, non-teaching kitchen staff so educators can focus on teaching. Furthermore, education, health, and agriculture ministries must coordinate through a unified governance framework to scale successful models of food sovereignty and inclusive education.

In doing so, Nepal would not only improve educational outcomes but also fulfill its deeper commitment to human rights, equity, and social justice making the right to education truly meaningful for every child. Although the funding is not enough everywhere, some places have started using creative ways to manage the budget for mid-day meals. This study concludes that there is a real possibility to promote and build a culture of creative funding and resource management to make the program more effective.

Wayforward for sustained Mid-Day Meal Program

Going through the findings, challenges and the conclusion, way forward initiatives are suggested. They are as follows:

1. **Make the Budget Fit the Local Reality:** Adjust the meal budget based on local food costs so schools in remote or expensive areas can still provide healthy, filling meals.
2. **Support Local Food and Community Involvement:** Some schools grow their own vegetables or buy directly from nearby farmers, and it works well! Encourage more schools to do this by offering small grants, technical help, and official support. This also supports local farmers and keeps food fresh.
3. **Get Ministries to Work Together:** The program touches on food, health, education, and agriculture but these sectors often work separately. Create a team from different ministries to plan and improve the program together, so efforts are better coordinated from central to the local level governments.
4. **Hire Staff Just for Cooking:** Many teachers are also preparing meals, which takes time away from teaching. Hire dedicated cooks and kitchen helpers for every school. Train them well and pay them fairly so they can focus on meal preparation and safety. If this way forward is expensive and cannot be implemented, train the local cooks and the potential cooks so that they can volunteer for better cooking.
5. **Improve the Nutrition of the Meals:** In some places, meals are limited to less healthy items like churabhujia and maida. Create menus with a mix of local, nutritious foods. Include seasonal fruits, vegetables, and traditional grains like millet or buckwheat, depending on the region.
6. **Use the Program as a Learning Opportunity:** School gardens and kitchens can be more than just food sources; they can be learning spaces. Include gardening, cooking, and nutrition in the school curriculum so the students also learn life skills while helping with meals. If the land is not available inside the school premise, obtain the neighboring land on lease and use students for students' farming including grade wise kitchen gardening.
7. **Monitor the Program Frequently:** Set up a simple digital system to track food quality, budgets, and attendance. Allow parents and students to share feedback or raise concerns anonymously.
8. **Ensure Additives to the Local Foods:** Peoples of school catchment have various food practices. Identify these practices, find out the shortcomings

- of these food intakes, and teach people to go for additives so that the local foods can be nutritious and also be affordable.
9. Use Locally Practiced Mdm: In some communities of Gandaki and Karnali province, people prepare nutritious soup out of their limited food items. They mix local vegetables, grains, and pieces of dried meat. Encourage parents to adopt, adapt and expand this type of nutritious soup making practice to the other communities of all the provinces.
 10. Explore the Inexpensive Food Making Practices of the People: Nepal has different types of cultural foods. Some of them are expensive and others are less expensive. Explore peoples' inexpensive food items, clinically test them, and make them a part of mid day meal.
 11. Prepare Inexpensive and Nutritious Food Items: The food industries can test and prepare inexpensive but nutritious food items. Encourage and reward such industries for the test and preparation of healthy and inexpensive food items for students' consumptions.
 12. Generate Resources at the Local Level: Creative funding can include activities like using local resources, connecting agriculture with the Mdm program, and finding ways to support meals through community efforts. This funding approach is different because it focuses on creating and managing resources for the betterment of students' nutrition and ducation, rather than just spending the given budget.
 13. Encourage Matching Fund: Another possibility is parental matching, where parents contribute alongside government funding. This partnership can help strengthen the Mdm program by increasing resources and encouraging greater community ownership and involvement.
 14. Prepare Food at Place: As the policy emphasizes providing fresh and nutritious meals, it is more effective to prepare the meals directly at the schools. This can be achieved by involving parents, encouraging student participation, and utilizing teachers' free time to support meal preparation and distribution. Such collaboration can strengthen ownership, improve the quality of meals, and create a more vibrant and connected school environment.
 15. Apply Mixed Method to Crosscheck Perceived Information with the Hard Data: This perceptual/soft study requires hard data to authenticate the finding suggesting that mixed method approach can be applied. This can be done in two ways: one, generating the hard data of the selected school for comparison: two, using the secondary data of the study schools that might be available in the school record.

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