



Nurturing Tomorrow's Future:

ENSURING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY FOR CHILDREN

Text by Eunice Mwaura and Cynthia Omondi
Images by Cynthia Omondi

It is estimated that 23 million primary school-age children in Africa attend classes hungry. Malnutrition is also responsible for 45 percent of deaths among children under five. Victoria Friendly Montessori on Rusinga Island is trying to change these statistics. In addition to feeding children at school, they also provide food and nutrition education to parents.

Victoria Friendly Montessori students are served two meals a day—breakfast and lunch. In the morning they drink porridge, composed of millet, sorghum, cassava, and ground nuts. They are also served a meal at lunchtime which varies depending on the day of the week, and fruit every day.

‘These meals prevent them from being susceptible to diseases; a well-nourished body is better equipped to fight off infections and diseases,’ says Jackline Atieno Opala. She is the school’s nurse.

‘Ensuring proper nutrition is a fundamental pillar of child healthy development. Children’s food during their early years lays the foundation for their growth and overall well-being,’ she adds. Her primary goal is every student’s well-being and optimal health. She started working at the school six years ago. In contrast to when she began, she says there has been a gradual improvement in the quality of nutritious food on the island.

‘Educating children about the importance of a balanced diet at school helps them develop healthy eating habits that last a lifetime. They will carry this over into adulthood and reduce the risk associated with poor dietary choices,’ she says. Following a study conducted by the Green Food Foundation, the school implemented a nutrition project. This was after the realisation that children who attended the school were at nutrition risk due to only having fish and *ugali* (cornbread) as a staple for all meals.

‘We got a visit from The Green Food Foundation which conducted a comprehensive study that involved blood tests among some of the children. The results were worrying. Most of them were anaemic,’ she explains. These findings, Opala says, raised significant concerns about the nutritional quality of the food they consumed. In response, the Foundation offered recommendations to address them.

They stressed the importance of quantity and quality of food. To tackle this problem effectively, the Foundation is now working on developing a curriculum that can be implemented at the household level. It aims to educate parents and caregivers about the importance of nutritious and balanced meals for their children.

Residents of Rusinga Island on Lake Victoria depend primarily on fish for food. ‘Vegetables and fruits are rarely included in local meals. This poses a nutritional risk to children. We have seen the role schools play in shaping children’s eating behaviours. By teaching them the importance of a balanced diet at an early age, we instil healthy eating habits that can benefit their long-term health,’ she says.

Opala says a balanced diet provides the necessary nutrients, vitamins, and minerals required for optimal physical growth and development in children. Nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, and proteins ensure children grow healthily and have the energy to participate actively in school activities.

‘We also teach them about portion sizes. In our quest to address nutrition among children, serving plates designed for young ones play a crucial role. These plates are intentionally smaller than the standard plates for pupils in upper classes, ensuring accurate portion control for the little ones,’ she says.

By using smaller plates, children are encouraged to consume appropriate meal portions, which promotes a balanced diet and prevents overeating. These specially designed plates cater for young children’s physical needs and also make mealtime more engaging and enjoyable. Their designs are visually appealing with vibrant colours that capture children’s attention, making their dining experience more exciting. By incorporating these small plates into the lives of young pupils, the school takes a significant step toward fostering healthy eating habits and nurturing their overall well-being.

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A balanced diet meal served for lunch at Victoria Friendly Montessori school



Nurse Jackline Atieno Opala in the school garden

To ensure children are well-nourished both at school and at home, a proactive initiative has been taken by Victoria Friendly Montessori School to educate parents about the importance of kitchen gardening. This innovative approach aims to empower parents with the knowledge and skills needed to grow fresh and nutritious foods in their homes. A walk around the island shows the increasing number of households that have embraced kitchen gardening.

Through educational programmes and workshops, parents are enlightened about the numerous benefits of growing a garden. They learn about the nutritional value of fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as the positive impact they can have on their children’s health and development. Kitchen gardens serve as an effective means to supplement meals with organic and pesticide-free produce, thereby improving their diet quality.

As parents become more knowledgeable about kitchen gardening, they also develop a sense of community. They share tips, experiences, and surplus produce with their neighbours, fostering a supportive network of like-minded individuals. This exchange of ideas further creates a vibrant atmosphere where everyone can learn from each other’s successes and challenges. This further strengthens the community bond.

‘The initiative to educate parents about kitchen gardening has yielded promising results. By promoting self-sufficiency, improving nutrition, and fostering community engagement, this approach ensures children are well-fed in school and at home,’ she asserts.

‘As you observe the increasing number of kitchen gardens in the community, it becomes evident that this simple, yet impactful practice has the potential to transform not only the way we eat but also the way we connect with our food and each other,’ she concludes.