The Role of Teachers, Cultural Elders, and the Interreligious Council of Uganda in Instituting Learners' Lunch Meals in Christian and Muslim-Founded Public Schools

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Abstract
The paper examines the roles that classroom teachers, cultural elders, and the Interreligious Council of Uganda can play to sustainably introduce learners' lunch meals in Christian- and Muslim-founded public schools. To respond to the thesis, a contemporary historical analysis methodology that focuses on examining recent past events to align them with the present circumstances was followed. Study findings indicate that in Uganda, 66 % of the learners do not access school lunch meals, a condition that has resulted in massive school dropouts. Failure of parents to provide school lunch meals is attributed to: a) the life survival of most rural based households in Uganda is below the poverty line, b) education policies in Uganda do not mandate teachers, religious bodies, and cultural leaders to empower learners to demand for their school feeding rights, c) most parents are ignorant of the consequences associated with their negligence to meet the basic life necessities of their children, d) foundation bodies have roles to play in solving the challenges that affect schooling feeding but education policies do not spell out measurable programme outputs that can be progressively executed, monitored, and evaluated using government legislated tools, e) remuneration and punitive lines do not exist that demand religious bodies to play their roles in ensuring that education is treated as a serious project that must be accessed by young people, and f) the programme outputs of Interreligious Council of Uganda in cementing Christian-Muslim relationships, promoting African collective responsibility, and ensuring that such connections support school lunch meals programme, are not visible in the primary and secondary schools. It was recommended that education policies that spell out the roles of teachers, parents, religious bodies, and cultural leaders in supporting cultural context school feeding programmes need to be crafted and implemented by the government of Uganda.

Keywords: **Children, Education, Feeding, Religion, Culture**

1.0 Introduction

The school feeding programme, a strategy to minimise education infanticide, is documented to have begun in Europe in the 1700s. Educationists of the time noticed that children from poverty-stricken households studied without lunch snacks at school. Studying on an empty stomach affected children's abilities to concentrate in class and to attain acceptable academic scores. In the long run, malnutrition-related illnesses became common among children hailing from financially unstable households. The education career life robbing challenge was brought to the attention of policymakers, and, as a result, financially average parents were encouraged to contribute to the

lunch meal programmes, and charity organisations came in to support children from vulnerable households (Demas, 2022).

The period from the 19th to the early 20th centuries saw non-state actors and governments address the challenges of child poverty and malnutrition in schools. Currently, on the global scene, 87 per cent of the states have contextualised school feeding policies, with 98 % of the meals funded from locally generated revenues. In these countries, school feeding has been found to: increase school enrolments, reduce school dropouts, curb malnutrition-related illnesses, and improve intellectual knowledge retention. However, studies conducted in 2024 show that 126 million children from high-poverty-stricken countries study without access to lunch meals. In countries with a high level of child stunting, 165 million children do not have access to school meals. In countries affected by poverty and child stunting, 80 million children attend school on an empty stomach (Bundy et al., 2024, pp. 5-9; Watkins et al., 2024, pp. 1-4).

On the African continent, 17% of the 407.8 million children surveyed in 2023 were accessing school meals (Global Child Nutrition Foundation, 2024, 22). This then means that most African countries are struggling with the puzzle of how best to feed children in public schools sustainably. In Uganda, lunch meals funded by the government were introduced in all public schools in 1979, but due to meagre cash inflows, the school feeding programme for all was abandoned, and instead, the government concentrated on the Karamoja sub-region, which has continuously experienced chronic dry spells and famine affecting children's schooling (Kibenge, 2005, p.1).

To promote the school feeding programme in Uganda, government officials and civil society organisations conducted sensitisation campaigns to encourage parents across the country to feed their children at school. Nonetheless, the study conducted in Uganda in 2019 revealed that 66 % of the pupils were not accessing school lunch meals. Less than average children (41 %) studying in urban areas received meals at school, compared with 32 % of children studying in rural-based schools (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2019, pp. 1-2). The pie charts displayed by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021, p. 11) illustrate that the Teso, Elgon, and Bukedi sub-regions have the largest number of learners who go without school lunch meals. It is against this background that the study examined the roles that classroom teachers, cultural elders, and the Interreligious Council of Uganda can play in sustainably instituting learners' lunch meals in Christian- and Muslim-founded public schools in Uganda.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Social Ecological Model. The theory that was developed in the 1970s by Urie Bronfenbrenner postulates that to improve human nutrition, all levels – individual, household, cultural setting, and public policies that influence human development must be examined (Janse, 2023). This then means that, if lunch meals are to be implemented in public schools in Uganda, then the nutritional needs of learners, the inputs of their caregivers, the participation of teachers, the involvement of religious and cultural leaders, and the government policy framework on the subject matter need to be examined.

In essence, the model provides a yardstick for understanding Uganda's struggles to meet learners' lunch needs. As such, multiple interventions can be crafted to ensure contextual food provision through sustainable measures. However, the approach appears to be costly in the process of influencing mindset change, but if the carefully crafted measures are patiently and strategically implemented, then the diverse cultural communities in Uganda can adopt measures that can lead to sustainable provision of nutritious school lunch meals in their settings.

3.0 Research Methodology

To ascertain the roles that tributary stakeholders can play in instituting lunch meals in public schools in Uganda, a contemporary historical literary analysis methodology that examines recent past events to align them with the present circumstances (Rüsen, 2015) was employed. Accordingly, archived contemporary works were examined to showcase the roles that classroom teachers, cultural elders, and the Interreligious Council of Uganda can play in influencing the sustainable provision of lunch meals in schools.

The secondary data collection approach was utilised because it was less costly in monetary terms and time-saving as compared to primary data collection techniques. However, compilers of archived databases might have omitted important information during field data collection and data analysis (Hillier, 2022). Therefore, physical interaction with classroom teachers, cultural elders, and the management of the Interreligious Council of Uganda to understand the underlying factors affecting the provision of school lunch meals in public schools would strengthen the findings highlighted in this study.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Poverty Trends in Uganda and School Feeding

Poverty is understood differently across cultural contexts. Not all people who lack basic life necessities perceive themselves as poor. Some are content in their environmental survival states. As a matter of fact, people accustomed to daily ration pocket-to-mouth survival may not bother to stretch their minds to craft income-generating strategies that can aid them to move towards financial sufficiency. That is why on many occasions, even when Jesus encouraged the followers to have compassion for the poor (Mathew 25:31- 46 and Luke 10:29-37), He waited for vulnerable people to bring to display their genuine life goals after which He approved and provided life-energising seed capital (Matthew 8:5-13; 9:20-22; Mark 2:1-12).

I suppose not all people portrayed as poor by the scholars perceive their state in the same way. Someone can be a drug addict, a street beggar, physically disabled, etc., but peaceful and contented in their cultural universe. That may be the reason; when charity support is extended to some people, the donor's anticipated goals tend to become thinly realised. Nonetheless, poverty-stricken individuals are associated with contagious risky lifestyles that, if such behavioural displays are not controlled, such people can disorganise the public health, peace, and social order of the community. Certainly, people who have embraced poverty mindsets are disastrous to society (Ramphoma, 2014, p. 60).

In examining poverty trends in Uganda, the national census conducted in 2024 revealed that among the population aged 10 years and above, 20.2 % had never attended school to acquire formal education and intellectual skills, 39.4% had attained only primary education, and 5.7 % had completed post-secondary education. Karamoja sub-region (25.4 %) had the lowest literacy attainments (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024, pp.42-43). Illiterate people are catalysts and incubators of superstitious lifestyles that influence economic poverty mindsets in society. Even when they are encouraged to embrace constructive poverty alleviation programmes, and money is loaded in their hands, in most instances, they blow up the good intentions and become worse than before (Sharon, 2025).

In Uganda, several poverty alleviation programmes were rolled out to support the rural poor to walk towards financial independence, but minimal results were realised at the apex of every staged

poverty alleviation interval. The precolonial and colonial periods witnessed the introduction of cash crops such as cotton, coffee, tea, and tobacco. In addition, livestock farming was encouraged in some parts of the country. The agricultural inputs were geared toward supporting Ugandans in earning reasonable household incomes and surplus used to meet the educational needs of their children, but very little was realised among rural-based households. It was, instead, children from well-positioned community elites in government and religious institutions who accessed quality education (Harris, 2005, pp. 1-7).

During post-colonial Uganda, several programmes that involved the distribution of money and agricultural inputs to organised community groups were launched (URN, 2022; Omona, 2021, p. 199). Despite the huge chunks of money and technical support dispatched all over the country for a long period, Uganda is rated at 41 % on the global scene with a huge population of 44. 3 million people are nursing the lethal effects of economic poverty (Sharon, 2025; Opportunities International, 2025).

In Uganda, the daily survival per individual is measured at 1 US dollar, which means that if a person does not consume at least Uganda shillings 3,500 – 4,000, then the person's daily survival is below the internationally acceptable poverty line (Owor, 2020, p. 15). Countrywide, individuals living below the poverty line are located in Eastern Uganda (35.7 %), Northern (32.5 %), Central (21.4 %), and Western regions, with a score of 11.4 % (Poverty Maps of Uganda, 2019, pp. 12-26). The most poverty-stricken communities in Uganda are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Poverty Trends in Uganda

Community	Bukedi	West Nile	Karamoja	Bugishu	Acholi	Busoga	Teso	Kegezi
%	78	76	76	72	69	61	50	49

Source: UNICEF, 2020.

Given the above trends whereby most families are operating below the poverty line, it becomes hard for households to raise money to support their children to feed at school. However, in Uganda, the incidence of famine-stricken communities is minimal. Parents' failure to even pack school lunches for their children could be negligence on their part or ignorance of the nutritional importance of lunch meals to a child's mental health and active involvement in class activities. In most rural families in Uganda, two meals are maintained: lunch and supper. Lunch meals are served between 12:30 and 1:40 pm, while Supper is usually served between 6:00 pm and 9:00 pm.

This means that after a night's sleep, school-going children whose homes are more than two hours' walk to school spend five days a week on an empty stomach.

Children spending several days without meals at school, which is meant to boost their growth, is a crime against humanity in the current decade. Wrapped within the international treaties on children's rights are custodianship responsibilities that governments and caregivers of children are required to put into practice. To make matters worse, education policies in Uganda do not mandate that teachers, religious bodies, and cultural leaders empower learners to demand their school feeding rights through dialogue, engagement, and legal action. To the extreme, most parents are ignorant of the consequences of their negligence in meeting the basic life necessities of their children. This then means that if policies are clearly crafted that hold teachers, cultural leaders, and religious bodies accountable for children's failure to access meals at school, then school feeding programmes can be strengthened.

In reality, teachers are nurturers of children, religious bodies indoctrinate communities, and cultural leaders are custodians of social traditions. The government cannot win the battle to support children from diverse cultural communities in accessing lunch meals without the roles of the three giant bodies being thoughtfully legislated, programmed, and, where need be, ecumenical religious-cultural task forces in charge of education at community levels, reasonably remunerated.

4.2 Uganda National Guidelines on School Feeding and Children's Rights

Uganda national policy guidelines on education stipulate the roles of parents towards their biological and adopted children, thus: register a child at school; provide moral, spiritual, cultural, and psychological support; and provide food, clothes, accommodation, medication, and transport fare (Education Act, 2008, p.2). Such arrangements are in line with international laws that regulate children's rights to which Uganda is a signatory. In alignment with international treaties, the government of Uganda crafted policies and came up with intervention measures that regulate child protection from local villages to national level (Okurut & Anyabolu, 2013, pp.8-11).

According to the legal framework of Uganda, a person aged 17 years and below is regarded as a child (The Republic of Uganda, 2016). The law requires parents and authorised guardians to cater for children's education needs, protect children from psychological and physical injuries, and to

provide them with all basic life necessities – food, shelter, clothes, and medical care (Black Hall Publishing, 2019).

In Uganda, there are formal and informal structures that offer protective services to children (ECLT Foundation, 2024). Child protection services are offered at three levels: a) At the national level, the affairs of: orphans and vulnerable children, child trafficking, child labour, crimes against children, child rehabilitation, and child education policies are regulated and rolled out for implementation by relevant district organs; b) at the district levels, there are specialists and committees responsible for protection of children's rights. These committees are in touch with local council leaders in the communities; c) within the communities, there exist child protection informal structures that include extended families, friendly neighbours, and religious institutions that render protection services to children (Ssembatya, 2016, pp. 10-22).

After the launch of education for all in 1997, the government of Uganda took on the responsibility of paying teachers' salaries, providing instructional aids, and allocating capitation grants to improve school infrastructure. The obligation of feeding children while at school was left to parents, guardians, and school management committees. Different meal alternatives were prescribed and promoted by the government, thus: cash contributions from parents to pay for meals served at school, home-packed food for each child, and community context staple food handout contributions so that meals are prepared at school (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2019, pp.1-2).

However, the legal obligations that specify which governing body is responsible for enforcing the school feeding programme are not highlighted in Ugandan education policies. Had punitive laws been in action, then few incidents of child lunch meal starvation would have been at play in Uganda. Of course, the cardinal people to report such incidences to legal authorities would be teachers, but in a society where a clear line of child feeding at school is not clearly stipulated, it would be hard to hold the culprits accountable. In Uganda, some children pack meals, others buy snacks in the open market, those whose homes are adjacent to schools go back for lunch, few pay for meals at school, several scavenge for fruits in the bushes and food leftover in rubbish pits, while reasonable numbers spend days at school on empty stomach (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021, p.11).

In other parts of the world, school feeding programmes implemented among economically struggling communities have been reported to have resulted in: retention of learners in schools, improved children's classroom concentration, reduced incidence of nutrition-related illnesses that affect children's mental growth, and minimisation of teenage marriages. On the other hand, since governments buy locally available foods, school feeding programmes have been found to: increase the demand for nutritious foods in the local markets, create jobs for traders, increase incomes of households that engage in farming, and bring about sustainable food chain production in society (Reliefweb, 2021).

Successful government engagements with communities may mean that local communities are focused and culturally well organised. They are thirst-driven, looking forward to seeing their children attain bright professional destinies. A little push by the government makes it easy for them to inspire their children to embrace education with dedication and smiles. Definitely, government can provide school meals, remunerate teachers, supply teaching aids, and inject funds in infrastructural development to make it easy for children hailing from economically impoverished households to access quality education; but, there are several basic life necessities and cultural moral etiquettes that affect children's schooling, that if parents, teachers, children, cultural leaders, and religious bodies are not held accountable by the state to play their roles, then free hand-outs become a waste and to a certain extent, government gamble dole outs to attract political votes.

4.3 Teachers, Cultural Leaders, and School Feeding

Uganda National Teacher Policy stipulates the roles that education specialists are expected to execute. Some of the roles of teachers include: empowering learners with numeracy and literacy skills; inspiring learners to celebrate their personalities, develop self-esteem, and embrace constructive social values; instilling in learners a patriotic mindset of communal responsiveness; and promoting school-community dialogue. Teachers are regarded as nurturers of human resources, which are much needed to influence the country's socioeconomic transformation. To the effect, international treaties to which Uganda is a signatory, uphold that education is a fundamental human right that children should not be denied and that every person, as they so desire, has the liberty to engage in lifelong learning (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2018, pp.1-2).

Nevertheless, a screenshot of teachers' mundane tasks, such as the scheme of work, lesson plans, and learners' activity outputs, is a classroom fence. Many of the graded classroom activities are theory-based. There are no learner-classroom community extension engagement income-generating projects recognised in the education curriculum for stage grading. It would be such socially and culturally focused income-generating projects that teachers would curricula support learners to initiate in their homes to generate support towards the school feeding programme.

In Uganda, even when teachers are portrayed as nurturers of human resources, crafted policies sideline them in the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. Teachers are custodians of knowledge, and if their inputs are teacher-learner-parent interactions in children's households, then economic revival can be the outcome. Nonetheless, to influence compliance, household economic projects need to be tagged with staged, progressive academic grades.

Young people respect their teachers because they wield the painful rod of academic grading, and thus they take classroom instructions seriously. In the same way, most societies respect the roles teachers play in the academic and moral upbringing of their children (Musoke et al, 2016, pp. 194-200). Certainly, income-generating projects initiated by learners, supervised by teachers and parents, are integrated into the game; such cultural heritage practical endeavours are most likely to progress positively.

In reality, cultural communities in Uganda are diverse, and each has specialised household income-generating projects. It is such indigenous income-generating projects that need to be promoted. During the 2024 national census, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024, pp. 257-262) established that most Ugandans (80.2 %) were engaged in crop husbandry for household consumption, with a negligible number (17.4 %) for commercial purposes. Agricultural practices for household consumption were majorly practised in the Teso sub-region (87.1 %) and in Kampala city (12.1 %) at a lower scale. Among the households, a few farmers (3.5%) were utilising irrigation equipment to boost crop yields. In livestock farming, 36.7 % of Ugandans were involved, of whom 78.6 % were poultry farmers. Countrywide, 66.6% of households with all types of livestock were in the Teso sub-region. However, specific crop and livestock farming varieties were found to be highest in the regions indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: High Level Crop and Livestock Farming Communities in Uganda

Region	Crop Grown	%	Region	Livestock Kept	%
Lango	Maize	73.2	Acholi	Chicken	87.2
Kigezi	Beans	68.8	West Nile	Goats	68.9
	Sweet potatoes	55	Bunyoro	Pigs	46
Bugisu	Matooke	52.3	Karamoja	Cattle	67.8
Rwenzori	Coffee-Arabica	8		Sheep	50.9

Source: Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024, pp.259-262)

The table display indicates that Uganda has favourable conditions for crop growing and livestock management. The question to ponder, then, is: why are the citizens struggling to attain financial independence? Why deny children meals at school, when there are no alarming reports indicating that children are denied meals in their families? The methodology for engaging teachers, parents, and cultural leaders to ensure sustainable lunch provision for children is a puzzle that needs to be solved.

Perhaps, if classroom community extended knowledge is tested and awarded academic scores at the household level, parents might become part of their children's learning process. On the other hand, a community that receives a failing grade on a teacher-supervised economic project can be a source of shame for the entire household. Simple as it may sound, failure grades can send arrows of pain through the guts of parents, and even irresponsible parents can be haunted by their community neighbours. Certainly, a celebrated excellent grade can revive the spirits and spur individuals to work harder. In the long run, successful income-generating projects at the household level can become giant projects that might need a little push from the government to usher economically struggling communities towards financial independence. Once money finds its way into the pockets and there is plenty of food on the tables, households can send their children to high academic institutions to acquire professional skills.

Nevertheless, for classroom extension engagements to yield results, there ought to be a legal framework that stipulates teacher-learner-parent-cultural leader engagements and how teachers' and local community cultural elders' in-charge-of-education extension services can be remunerated. In every African society, there are elders whose voices, if neglected, the government can struggle to achieve the visualised intentions. It is such elders who know indigenous knowledge transfer methods, wrathful divine invocations, and the disciplinary procedures that can be utilised to tame irresponsible members of society (Tabuti & Damme, 2012, pp.29-36).

In African culture, collective involvement and responsiveness to champion the common good of society is the divine role flagged by community elders. For instance, when it comes to identifying with bereaved families, the sick, those staging initiation cultural celebrations, and community ritual cleansing, all natives are called upon to get involved by way of providing financial, material, moral, and labour support. Failure to participate in collective community initiatives attracts severe punishment from community elders, and, at the extreme, it leads to social rejection, misfortunes, and community expulsion. Community responsiveness, then, is the oil that cements African social relationships and ensures that the collective needs of society are catered for (Tabuti & Damme, 2012, pp.29-36).

However, even when such cultural outputs bring Africans together to celebrate their indigenous ancestral identity, weaknesses are observable in several ways: a) there is too much emphasis on communalism, which puts much pressure on gifted members of society to meet the collective needs of society. The approach breeds a band of lazy people who develop dependency syndrome mentality; b) emphasis on group consensus suffocates individual innovations; c) everyone is forced to adhere to social traditions and such conflicts with international human rights; and d) even when elders have historical experiences, they may not be up-to-date with the changing knowledge in the global world that needs modification inputs of innovative young brains (Tabuti & Damme, 2012, pp.29-36).

Weaknesses notwithstanding, the roles African community elders play in cementing relational cohesion cannot be underestimated, but national and international human rights treaties on education for all can be Africanised to ensure that indigenous people are not suffocated in championing literacy education in their diverse communities, but are inspired to manipulate their cultural resources to support the school feeding programme.

Obviously, in the process of promoting school feeding, there are irresponsible parents who may be disastrous to children-initiated household projects, but well-crafted policies can hold them accountable. When a parent is reported by the school administration to the local community elders in charge of education and is penalised, such a parent is most likely to reform. In reality, in the process of alleviating economic poverty and ensuring that children have school meals, there ought to be crafted policies that minimise abuse and laziness in a given cultural context.

Of course, the Ministry of Education and Sports has hinted at rolling out a plan to ensure that millions of learners in public schools in Uganda have access to lunch meals. It is projected that the government of Uganda will inject money into the feeding programme (Opio, 2024). Whether the feeding programme will be sustainable and how such a move will influence learner retention in schools are what citizens are waiting to celebrate. For many years, the school feeding programme has been in play in the Karamoja sub-region, but school dropouts and illiteracy levels are the highest in the country (Ampaire, 2024). Perhaps, success stories on the countrywide school feeding rollout might be recorded among the well-focused communities. Even then, focussed communities to be successful, there ought to be enforcement of contextualised child protection policies, without which, the anticipated good intentions of government are most likely to hit a dead end.

4.4 Interreligious Council of Uganda and School Feeding

The Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU), founded in 2001, is a body that brings together different Christian and Islamic sects in the country to the interfaith dialogue table to work towards minimising social injustices and solving challenges that cause economic poverty, disease epidemics, and civil unrest. Great achievements of the organisation are reported in the areas of: minimising the HIV/AIDS pandemic, providing humanitarian support to vulnerable people and orphans, settling political conflicts, building a strong network with government and development partners, and business management capacity building for religious leaders. In addition, several tributary organisations have been established that offer specialised technical services to specialised interfaith groups. Tributary entities include: Peace and Leadership Institute, Interfaith Women Network, Interfaith Youth Alliance, and Senior Citizens's Forum (Kitakule, 2021, p. 45).

Nonetheless, a screen view of IRCU's programme outputs makes it hard to trace the impact their voices have had on addressing the challenges affecting the education sector in Uganda, yet the Education Act (2008, p. 12) defines religious entities as Foundation Bodies of public schools. The information displayed by the Ministry of Education and Sports (2017, pp. 28-34, 54), as indicated in Tables 3 and 4, indicates that religious bodies control 11,573 primary and 1,200 secondary schools.

Table 3: Primary Schools in Uganda and Foundation Bodies

Foundation Body	Government Aided	Not Government Aided	Total
Church of Uganda	4,667	519	5,186
Roman Catholic	4,224	772	4,996
Islamic	790	306	1.096
Seventh Day Adventist	154	143	295
		Subtotal	**11,573**
Entrepreneurs	22	3,532	3,565
Community	947	1,805	2,752
Government	1,046	8	1,054
Others	185	1,176	1,361
		Subtotal	**8,732**

Source: Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017, p.28.

Table 3 clearly illustrates that religious institutions are custodians of many primary schools in the country. Research conducted in 2017 revealed that 59.2 % of the primary schools funded by the government of Uganda were of religious foundation. This means that religiously founded schools are babysitters of the majority of children benefiting from universal primary education. The study also found that the largest number of primary schools (90 %) operated as day schools, and 10 % were boarding schools. Among pupils enrolled in primary schools, 11.8 % were orphans, of whom 83.1 % were studying in government-aided day schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017, pp. 28-34). The fact that orphans were accessing education in public schools, it means that they had no opportunity to be supported by religious bodies. They were probably under the custodianship of their extended family members, as is the norm in Africa (Tabuti & Damme, 2012, pp. 29-36).

When it came to secondary schools, the study found that religious bodies owned substantial numbers of schools (Table 4).

Table 4: Secondary Schools and Foundation Bodies

Foundation Body	Number of Schools
Church of Uganda	504
Roman Catholic Church	514
Islamic	141
Seventh Day Adventists	41
	Subtotal: 1,200
Entrepreneurs	896
Community	452
Others	260
	Subtotal: 1,608

Source: Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017, p.54.

Among the secondary schools, 54.95 % were found to be operating as day schools, 7.8 % were partially boarding, and 37.4 % offered boarding services (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017, p. 54). Study findings revealed that the majority of students cannot afford the costs of boarding services, indicating that many Ugandans are trapped in a web of economic poverty.

Economic poverty is a serious challenge that is affecting young people's access to quality education. Looking at the legislated roles of the foundation body as laid out in the Education Act (2008, p.12), which include: overseeing education programme operations of their schools, promoting religious and cultural ethical values among learners, advocating for education policy reforms, and engaging in resource mobilisation initiatives to support education programmes. It means that foundation bodies have roles to play in solving the challenges affecting the schooling of young people, but education policies do not specify measurable programme outputs that can be progressively implemented, monitored, and evaluated using government-legislated tools. In addition, remuneration and punitive lines do not exist that demand religious bodies to play their roles in ensuring that education is treated as a serious project that must be accessed by young people.

To the contrary, the trend of children dropping out of schools at the watch of IRCU is alarming. Varying statistics displaying similar school dropout trends were recorded by Adipale, et al (2023, p.443) and Etukuri and Kwesiga (2023). These are displayed in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Primary School Dropout Rates in Uganda

Year of Enrolment	Numbers Enrolled	Year of Completion	Number Completed	Dropout Numbers	%age Dropouts
2010	1,943,552	2017	631,282	1,312,270	67.5
2011	1,839,714	2018	659,663	1,180,081	64.1
2012	1,876,565	2019	683,302	1,193,262	63.6
2013	1,875,553	2020	736,942	1,138,611	60.7

Source. Adipale, et al, 2023, p.443

Table 6: Primary School Dropout Rates in Uganda

Year of Enrolment	Numbers Enrolled	Year of Completion	Number Completed	Dropout Numbers	%age Dropouts
2010	1,943,552	2016	639,037	1,304,515	67
2011	1,839,714	2017	646,190	1,193,524	65
2012	1,877,801	2018	671,923	1,205,878	64
2013	1,883,803	2019	695,804	1,187,999	63
2014	1,932,489	2020	749,761	1,182,728	61
2015	1,800,000	2021	COVID-19	-	-
2016	1,888,847	2022	832,654	1,056,193	56

Source. Etukuri and Kwesiga, 2023.

Even when percentage trends appear to decline each year, the large number of children who drop out of school remains abnormal. The year 2021 was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; certainly, the number of candidates completing primary education would have increased in 2022, but alas, only 832,654 candidates appeared. Meaning that 1,800,000 children enrolled in 2015 abandoned school. School dropouts, in one way, are connected to children's inability to have school lunches. Such a challenge is linked to economic poverty, which has made it difficult for caregivers to support school feeding programmes financially and through food handouts. In Uganda, 84 % of rural-based households are projected to be languishing in economic poverty (Etukuri & Kwesiga, 2023).

Due to economic poverty, primary school children's retention in Uganda is rated at 33 % as compared to Kenya (84 %), Tanzania (78 %), and Rwanda, with a retention score of 81 % (Mpyangu, et al, 2014, pp.3-4). The retention rates of other East African countries at the time were above average, though it was not certain whether the retention of children in schools was tied to the provision of lunch meals. It could be that the cultural factors that affect education in those countries were adequately addressed. This means that if school feeding is to be implemented in Ugandan schools, cultural mindset challenges need to be addressed by IRCU, which plays a key role as the foundation body of schools.

Ugandan policymakers recognise the roles that can be played by the founders of schools (Education Act, 2008, p. 12). Even when some schools are not religiously founded, in such schools, Christian and Muslim religious values are emphasized. Within the schools are students and employees who majorly subscribe to Christianity, Islam, and a few others who subscribe to other minority religions, but most of them bear the marks of African religiosity. In these schools,

religiously indifferent people interact and share the learning space for a long period. Schools have become centres for social capital building for learners, parents, and school employees. However, the programme outputs of IRCU in cementing Christian-Muslim relationships, promoting African collective responsibility, and ensuring that such connections support lunch meals programme for learners, are not visible in the primary and secondary schools in Uganda.

In local communities, it is hard to trace the visibility of IRCU, yet most of the Christian and Muslim congregations' governance is structured from local villages to the national level. IRCU would ride on such leadership structures to trickle its influence on the local communities.

Within the communities are people who share the same Black cultural ancestry but are divided by intra- and interreligious conflicts. The input of IRCU would be to encourage the formation of interfaith clubs in schools and to establish a structured interfaith team of religious leaders. Interfaith religious leaders would then play their roles of setting up food granaries in schools and at staged intervals, mobilise believers to offer food hand-outs to support the feeding programme of schools.

Contained in Christian and Islamic teachings, giving a portion of one's income to support the needy is a divine mandate that attracts blessings, and failure to do so curses a believer's life career journey (Malachi 3:8-10; Qur'an 2:215, 9:103). Certainly, well-positioned religious leaders, watching infant academic genocide and doing nothing about it, it pricks the heart of God, who has entrusted them with pastoral leadership responsibilities to shepherd humanity! Among the poor, Jesus incarnates, and so Judgment becomes pronounced in the present time and shall be in eternity (Mathew 25:31-46).

4.5 Karamoja Sub-Region Education Initiatives and School Feeding

Formal education attainment in the Karamoja sub-region remains a mystery, even with the good intentions of teachers, IRCU, and several stakeholders involved, and will take decades to resolve, as community elders, parents, and learners are brought on board. In an effort to encourage children to enrol in schools and to equip them with academic skills, the government of Uganda, in partnership with the World Food Programme, has been providing meals to school-going children in the region since the 1980s (World Food Programme, 2020). On an annual basis, the World Food Programme provides lunch meals to children in 315 primary schools, which account for 78% of

the total number of schools in the region covering the districts of Amudat, Kotido, Nakapiripirit, Abim, Kaabong, Moroto, and Napaka (Asimire et al., 2024).

According to the World Bank, the school feeding programme is a social safety measure aimed at ensuring that vulnerable children receive basic education and nutritious food. The major aim of providing school meals is to: increase school enrolment, minimise absenteeism, reduce school dropouts, improve knowledge retention and academic performance, and encourage food production in the community (Ashinaga, 2022). As such, the World Bank, through the World Food Programme arrangements, provides lunch meals to needy school-going children in the Karamoja sub-region. This means they secure, purchase, and supply locally produced food in Uganda. Such a move encourages local communities to engage in food production. However, it seems the World Food Programme is involved in food distribution and less in empowering guardians of vulnerable children to develop household food production skills.

On the other hand, policy guidelines in Uganda that hold recipients of foreign aid accountable when they succeed in life, denote their expertise, and provide material handouts to support vulnerable groups in society, and also make it uncomfortable for the struggling poor to adopt a lethargic, overdependence mentality, are not available. Of course, the government extracts direct and indirect revenues from the citizens to meet the country's diverse demands, but African society is driven by collective responsibility and resource sharing. Each individual within a cultural stratum works hard to contribute to the common good of society. Nonetheless, overdependence on free handouts while folding hands in laziness is discouraged in African society (Tabuti & Damme, 2012, pp. 29-36). Certainly, free handouts without accountability strings attached are most likely to mutilate human brains, causing them to think and passionately walk out of ignorance and economic poverty.

So it is in Karamoja, in spite of free food being doled out and efforts to uplift the education standards, the region is associated with many life-robbing challenges. Infant and maternal mortalities are the highest in the country. Few children enrol to access free education, and negligible numbers complete primary and secondary education. The literacy levels in the region are the worst in the whole country (United Nations Communications Group, 2011, p.2). To the dismay, the national census conducted in 2024 revealed that the Karomoja sub-region had 74.2 % school dropouts (Ampaire, 2024). It was further revealed that 62.9% of households in the

Karamoja sub-region experienced severe food insecurity (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024, p. 271).

Even when schools are planted at all community levels in Karamoja sub-region, and there is free provision of Functional Adult Literacy Education in the region (Mafabi, 2007), it has been noted that the indigenous people are 'characterised by negative attitudes towards formal education' (Walugembe, 2008, p.2). The negativities are postulated to be rooted in Karamojong-European historical nasty encounters.

The storyline goes that in this region, psychic attachment to cattle is strongly entrenched in the public life of the Karamojongs. To them, they hold that they are the only tribe in the world that the Divine Force gave cows as an inheritance. The foreigners who own cattle are thieves, and cows should be taken from them using all possible forceful means. To that end, during precolonial Uganda, the Karamojongs acquired guns to facilitate cattle-rustling expeditions. Guns were bartered for ivory with Arab merchants. To their advantage, every gun bullet rewarded them with many cows. Cattle in the indifferent cultural communities were raided, and people in unarmed neighbourhoods died massively (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p.12).

To minimise cattle rustling, the British government in 1911 dispatched the military to disarm the Karamojongs. By 1913, all Karamojong warriors were disarmed. The region was sealed off by the military, and that made it difficult for Karamojongs to assault neighbouring communities. A permit had to be obtained from the governing authorities for the natives to move out of Karamoja and for foreigners to visit the area. It is noted that the British exhibited racist attitudes towards the natives to the extent that they put up a signpost at the sub-region entrance that informed visitors that they had reached the 'Real Heart of Africa, where they can enjoy gazing at naked people' (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p.13).

In the cultural context of the Karamojongs, men imprisoning their reproductive organs in the underwear suffocates ancestors who reside in the thighs, and women covering their breasts deny ancestors free access to the divine food stored in the breasts. To the indigenous people's cultural pride, men with huge dangling reproductive organs and those with hydroceles are celebrated in the community. Failure to expose male reproductive organs and breasts for public consumption can result in painful male reproductive organ sores and breast wounds inflicted by the gods. In the worst scenario, disease epidemics are most likely to erupt and destroy human beings and livestock

in the community. In 1971, one of Uganda's presidents, Amin, decreed that all Karamojongs should dress decently by wearing shirts, blouses, skirts, trousers, and shoes. Surprisingly, the presidential directive resulted in a serious riot. Those who had attempted to wear clothes to look like Europeans were roughed up, stripped naked, their clothes torn into pieces, and they were made to eat the shreds. Even in the current decade, few Karamojong men wear trousers and underclothes; instead, the majority, in accordance with their cultural taboos against suffocating the ancestors who reside in the gonads, wrap their bodies in striped garments (TIME USA, LLC, 1971; Vibrant Holiday Safaris, 2025).

Due to the unconcerned lifestyles of the Karamojongs, to adjust to the European-tailored knowledge, the British became disgusted with the primitive Africans who resisted wearing clothes freely given to them to cover their nakedness, but preferred walking naked and defecating in the open. To the British, a woman exposing her breasts in public and men walking naked during the Victorian era was taboo and not acceptable (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p.13; The Independent, 2024; BBC News, 2014).

To scale down primitive lifestyles, the British government condemned the beastly lifestyles of the indigenous people, forced community elders to abandon cultural ceremonies that were perceived as barbaric, and put in place health centres, Christian religious stations, and educational institutions. Even when social services were in place to enable indigenous people to access lifesaving support and acquire European intellectual knowledge, many Karamojongs resisted and developed negative attitudes towards the people dressed in the garments that suffocated their ancestors. In the long run, the British and their Europeanised African associates were disgustingly referred to as ‘people of the pen’, and the natives were indoctrinated by the community elders to regard Europeans as terrible enemies and destroyers of their social traditions and cultural heritage (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p. 13).

Despite their prejudices, the British came to realise that they needed people with gunnery experience to be recruited into the army during World War Two. As such, with the stroke of a pen, assigning them combat field numbers inscribed on military uniforms and guns, Karamojongs were massively recruited into the army. Unfortunately, many young warriors died on the battlefield due to their failure to learn basic survival English skills and their inability to grasp battlefield instructions. Those who survived battlefield death traps brought back agonising lamentations. Out

of frustration, many Karamojongs hated Europeans all the more and all Africans who were associated with the propagation of European formal education. They observed that Europeans were destroyers of their cultural heritage, as they had suffocated their efforts to assemble their scattered cattle owned by the wrong people (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p. 14). In affirmation, one scholar documents,

> Since the 1930s, when the group symbolically buried a pen in the dirt, the Karamojong have refused to accept foreign education ... The elders believed that the pen was a bad omen since it had been used in the Second World War to conscript men into the army ... They further made it clear that they did not support formal education, and anyone who let their children join was banished by the elders and declared an enemy of society. Foreign teachers were also declared enemies, and any child who had attended school was forced to return home and be cleansed (Saminsky, 2010).

As soon as the British left the region after independence in 1962, the Karamojong elders carried out several ritualistic ceremonies to cleanse their community that had been polluted by the bad actions of Europeans. The Karamojongs dismantled and demolished school buildings, they burnt all educational materials, and looted all school property. They took the corrugated iron sheets and turned them into utensils for cooking and storing food items. They removed metal pipes that were used to support desks and turned them into gun barrels, spears, and sharp weapons to facilitate their cultural cattle rustling heritage. By the 1970s, schools were not operational and acceptable in Karamoja, a condition that the government of Uganda is struggling to engage opinion leaders and community elders to revive (Akabwai & Ateyo, 2007, p.15).

Ingrained in the psyche of Karamojongs is the allegiance to their customary laws. 'Customary law in Karamoja is rooted in the authority of the elders' (Carlson et al, 2012, p.12). Community elders are highly respected. Their democratic decisions are final, and every young person must abide by them (Nanyunja, 2001). Nonetheless, literature is unavailable that brings to display that the government of Uganda has taken deliberate steps to bring on board community elders to influence their subjects to embrace formal education. In addition, records are scarce that show that Karamojong elders have complained of poor quality of education in their area or even tendered their requests to the government and development partners to support the educational needs of their children. To the contrary, since famine is a phenomenon that hits the region every year, Karamojong children attend school to survive hunger, but not to consume the intellectual

knowledge offered by the government and several development partners in the region. To affirm it, most street beggars, child labourers, and scavengers of food in the rubbish heaps in the city centres of Uganda are Karamojongs (Ebele, 2021).

Just like elsewhere in the world, every culture has its social traditions that are strongly rooted in the mental universe of the indigenous people. Once young people are indoctrinated with negative attitudes towards formal education, and such attitudes are reinforced and rewarded by the adults, it is hard to instil innovative ideas in such minds. Such societies need to be approached with a lot of patience that comes with a price tag to pay. Certainly, free education cannot be withdrawn from Karamoja and at the same time, free meals at school cannot be stopped, but the two need to be dished out with friendly education achievement strings attached.

To the Karamojongs, divine nature has gifted them with all the cattle in the world. The dutiful obligation of every young warrior is to ensure that all cows in the hands of foreigners are forcefully retrieved (Nanyunja, 2001). The brave ones are rewarded with cows in a ceremonial recognition of their achievements in populating the Kraals and protecting the community. In addition, cattle are also ceremonially rewarded as a gesture of love and friendship. Young people who adhere to social traditions are recognised for their exceptional character, and in return, cows are rewarded for the respect they accord to elders. Certainly, the more cattle an individual possesses, the greater the respect such a person attracts in the community (Achieve Global Safaris, 2025).

Therefore, context-driven policies that ensure that culture is respected and education is embraced need to be crafted. Karamojong people are nomadic; caging them in a classroom eight hours a day and five days a week can be burdensome. Probably, offering piece-meal mobile and modular education to learners and then rewarding the best academic performers with cows and community elders with reasonable numbers of cattle in their effort to encourage people to embrace formal education would be a starting point to scale down the negativities towards formal education.

5.0 Conclusion

The number of children dropping out of government-aided schools in Uganda is alarming. Even when several social influences affect learners' retention in public schools, the lack of school lunch provision is the number one factor that significantly affects children’s school retention. To the effect, the Karamoja sub-religion would be celebrating child education progress, because in this

area, the government of Uganda, working with development partners, provides lunch meals to most learners, but school dropouts are the highest in the country.

In Uganda, the education policy guidelines that encourage parents to feed their children in schools and to ensure that children do not drop out of school are general. The policies do not clearly outline the roles that teachers, cultural leaders, and religious bodies can play in influencing and sustaining school feeding programs. Suppose this situation is not given urgent attention by the legislators, classroom teachers, cultural elders, and the Interreligious Council of Uganda to sustainably institute learners' lunch meals, in that case, the good intentions of the government of Uganda to provide quality education to all children hailing from poor households are most likely to continue yielding illiterate and semi-illiterate citizens, incapacitated of manipulating and innovating their cultural resources to move towards socioeconomic independence.

6.0 Recommendations

To strengthen school feeding programmes in public schools in Uganda, the following needs to be done

1) Education policies that spell out the roles of teachers, parents, religious bodies, and cultural leaders in supporting cultural context school feeding programmes need to be crafted and implemented by the government of Uganda.
2) The Interreligious Council of Uganda needs to play its pastoral role by way of: launching hierarchical interfaith leadership in communities, setting up food granaries in schools, and mobilising believers to offer food hand-outs to support the feeding programme of schools.

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