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School Children Promised Free Meals

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By Arthur Okwemba
Nairobi

By the end of next year the government is supposed to provide free school meals for all children in hunger prone areas using locally produced foods.

And after having their meals in school, these children should then be given some rations to take home, possibly for their siblings or other family members

These are some of the ambitious goals set out in the United Nations Millennium Project which was launched yesterday by the Vice-President Mr Moody Awori in Nairobi.

The free meal project, the report says, will translate into increased retention in schools and solve most of the malnutrition problems afflicting children in regions such as Eastern, North Eastern and parts of the Rift Valley.

To meet this and other general food requirements the report recommends that the government provide free or subsidized chemical fertilizers, and agroforestry products to smallholder farmers not later than the end of next year.

What this means is that the government has to undertake soil analysis from smallholder farms in most parts of the country, determine which nutrients are missing, and then provide free fertilizers for replenishment of the soils.

It is also recommended that Kenya distribute free, long-lasting, insecticide treated mosquito nets and effective anti-malarial medicines to all children in malaria endemic areas within the next three years.

This means the government has to provide nets to over 80 per cent of the children, up from the dismal number of 14 per cent who are currently sleeping under nets.

Malaria experts also say if the government adopts the recommendations; it will have to provide drugs such as Coartem, which cost over Sh 400 a dose, free of charge.

But farmers like James Okoth of Ugunja sub-location, Siaya District, is skeptical about the call for free fertilizers. "We have been asking them to subsidize fertilizers which they have been unable. Do you think they will now provide it free," he posed.

Calling such action as Quick Wins, the report, Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals, says these interventions have a very high potential short-term impact.

It provides a practical plan of how countries can achieve the time-bound Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. Chief among these goals is eradicating of extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; reducing child mortality, and combating HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases. In the report, Kenya and other countries are expected to eliminate, by the end of next year, user fees for basic health services, through increased financing towards health programmes by domestic and donors institutions. Many see this recommendation as boost to Ngilu's push for the controversial Health Insurance Scheme for all.

The report further recommends the immediate establishment of an office of science advisor to the president or prime minister to consolidate the role of science in national policy making.

All hospitals, schools and other social service institutions, it adds, should use appropriate technologies such as diesel generators and solar panels to access the Internet, water and sanitation.

The report reckons that the biggest challenge for Kenya and other developing countries is how to marshal the resources required to implement and sustain these interventions.

It therefore calls on developed countries to help heavily finance the work plans of these countries by undertaking various initiatives and policies.

One of them is to increase their Official Development Assistance from the current 0.25 percent of their Gross National Product to around 0.44 in 2006.

One of the task forces says developed countries aspiring for permanent membership on the UN Security Council will now have to show that 0.7 per cent of their GNP is going towards ODA, before such status is granted.

In addition, developing countries should enjoy improved market access, while debt relief has to be "more extensive and generous".

But the Kenyan Government will also be required to invest billions of shillings as well as engaging its citizen to contribute to the efforts of implementing the interventions.

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