

Implementation lessons from routine district-level public health monitoring of the chief minister's breakfast scheme in Tiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme (CMBS), launched by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 2022, is India's first state-funded universal breakfast programme for primary school children. Designed to reduce morning hunger and improve children's readiness for learning, the scheme complements existing school nutrition initiatives while promoting equitable access to nutritious food. Routine district-level public health monitoring in Tiruvallur district provided an opportunity to assess programme implementation under real-world conditions and identify operational practices supporting effective delivery. Field observations indicated timely meal preparation, satisfactory food safety and hygiene practices, active institutional ownership, and high programme acceptability among students, teachers, and parents. Routine monitoring also identified opportunities for strengthening infrastructure, menu diversity, and community participation. The implementation experience highlights the importance of supportive supervision, local administrative commitment, and continuous monitoring in sustaining large-scale school nutrition programmes. Tamil Nadu experience underscores the critical role of supportive supervision, local ownership, and continuous monitoring in sustaining large-scale school nutrition programmes, offering practical lessons for other Indian states.

Keywords: Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme; School nutrition; School feeding programme; Child nutrition; Public health monitoring; Tamil Nadu

1. Introduction

Childhood hunger remains an important public health concern, particularly among children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Children attending school without breakfast are more likely to experience reduced attention, poor classroom participation, and impaired learning. School breakfast programmes have therefore emerged as an effective strategy to improve child nutrition while supporting cognitive performance, school attendance, and educational outcomes. Systematic reviews and programme evaluations have consistently demonstrated that regular breakfast consumption is associated with better attention, classroom behaviour, and academic achievement among school-aged children. [1-5]

Recognising the need to address morning hunger among school children, the Government of Tamil Nadu launched the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme (CMBS) in September 2022, making it the first Indian state to implement a government-funded universal breakfast programme for primary school children. The initiative complements the state's long-standing school nutrition programmes by providing a nutritious breakfast before the commencement of classes, thereby improving children's readiness for learning and promoting equitable access to nutrition. The programme has subsequently expanded across the state, reflecting Tamil Nadu's continued commitment to child health, nutrition, and educational welfare. [6-8]

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The effectiveness of large-scale nutrition programmes depends not only on policy commitment but critically on implementation fidelity, including timely service delivery, food safety adherence, and multi-sectoral coordination. Timely meal preparation, adherence to food safety practices, supportive supervision, and coordinated efforts involving education, health, and local administration are essential for sustaining programme quality. Unlike periodic programme evaluations, routine district-level public health monitoring provides real-time operational feedback that facilitates early identification of implementation gaps and supports continuous quality improvement. This review shares operational insights from routine district-level public health monitoring of the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme in Tiruvallur district and discusses their implications for school nutrition programmes across India.

Routine district-level public health monitoring of the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme was carried out in Tiruvallur district through periodic field visits to government primary schools. A structured observation checklist was used to assess key domains including timeliness of meal preparation, food safety and hygiene practices, kitchen infrastructure, stock registers, and programme integration into daily school routines. Informal interactions were conducted with headmasters, teachers, cooking staff, students, and parents. Findings were documented as part of regular supervisory visits during the academic year 2023–2025. This being routine programme monitoring, formal sampling, quantitative data collection, and impact evaluation were not undertaken.

2. District-Level Public Health Monitoring: Implementation Lessons

Routine district-level public health monitoring provided an opportunity to examine the implementation of the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme under real-world conditions and identify operational practices that supported its delivery. Unlike periodic programme evaluations, routine monitoring generated immediate feedback on programme functioning, enabling early identification of operational issues and facilitating timely corrective measures. The observations presented here are derived from direct field visits, interactions with stakeholders and routine programme supervision rather than formal impact evaluation.

During monitoring visits to 48 schools in Tiruvallur District, timely meal preparation, regular supervision by headmasters and teachers, and coordinated participation of cooking staff reflected strong institutional ownership and local administrative commitment. Such integration into routine school functioning has been recognised as an important determinant of successful school feeding programmes, where sustained implementation depends not only on policy commitment but also on effective local leadership and operational support. [3,8]

Monitoring further indicated that programme quality extended beyond food provision. Schools generally maintained satisfactory food safety and hygiene practices, including clean cooking environments, appropriate food handling, regular maintenance of stock registers, and systematic supervision of meal preparation. Rather than functioning solely as an inspection exercise, routine monitoring promoted supportive supervision by identifying minor operational gaps and facilitating their timely resolution. This approach contributes to continuous quality improvement while strengthening accountability within the programme. [3]

Stakeholder interactions during routine visits revealed high programme acceptability among students, teachers, and parents. Students appreciated the timely availability of breakfast, particularly when familiar local menus were served, while teachers perceived that children were better prepared to participate in classroom activities after receiving the morning meal. Parents regarded the scheme as meaningful social support, especially for economically disadvantaged families, as it reduced the burden of ensuring breakfast before school. The convergence of these perspectives suggests that the programme's value extends beyond nutritional supplementation and has strengthened confidence in government-supported school nutrition services.

Routine monitoring identified areas for strengthening, including minor infrastructural gaps, limited kitchen gardens in some schools, and the need for greater menu diversity to enhance nutritional quality. Although these issues did not substantially affect programme implementation, addressing them may improve nutritional diversity and programme sustainability. Strengthening structured feedback mechanisms involving students, parents, and School Management Committees could further support continuous programme improvement and encourage greater community ownership.

Collectively, these observations suggest that the effectiveness of the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme is influenced as much by governance, institutional ownership, and supportive supervision as by nutritional provision itself. The implementation lessons emerging from routine district-level monitoring may therefore be valuable for other states planning to strengthen school-based nutrition programmes through similar public health initiatives.

3. Public Health Perspective

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme represents an important evolution in India's school nutrition programmes by extending nutritional support to the beginning of the school day. While the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has substantially improved school enrolment, attendance, and nutritional outcomes over several decades, the addition of a breakfast programme addresses an equally important but often neglected period of childhood hunger. By providing a nutritious breakfast before classes, the scheme addresses morning hunger and complements the Mid-Day Meal programme, thereby strengthening nutritional support throughout the school day.

The implementation experience from routine district-level monitoring suggests that the programme's success extends beyond food provision. Sustained political commitment, clearly defined administrative responsibilities, supportive supervision, and active participation of schools have together created an enabling environment for effective programme delivery. These operational characteristics, although less visible than nutritional outcomes, are fundamental to the long-term sustainability of large-scale public health programmes. [3,9]

A key lesson is the value of strong convergence between public health professionals, education authorities, and local administration for ongoing programme oversight. Regular interaction between health professionals, education authorities, local administration, and school personnel enabled continuous monitoring of programme quality while facilitating timely resolution of operational challenges. Such collaborative governance strengthens institutional accountability and provides opportunities for continuous programme improvement without disrupting routine service delivery.

Although the observations presented here are derived from routine programme monitoring rather than formal impact evaluation, they provide practical implementation insights that may complement evidence generated through large-scale research studies. Documentation of field experiences helps identify operational strengths, recognise context-specific challenges, and facilitate adaptive programme management. As other states explore strategies to strengthen school nutrition, the Tamil Nadu experience demonstrates that effective governance, supportive monitoring, and institutional ownership are as important as financial investment in ensuring programme success.

4. Conclusion

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme illustrates the integration of nutritional support, educational goals, and public health monitoring within a school-based programme.

Routine district-level monitoring showed that the programme was well accepted, operationally feasible, and supported by strong local ownership. Beyond improving access to nutritious food, the scheme highlights the importance of supportive supervision, coordinated governance, and continuous monitoring in sustaining large-scale child nutrition programmes. These implementation insights from Tamil Nadu can guide other states in designing and strengthening school-based nutrition initiatives through robust monitoring and local governance mechanisms.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

This article is based on routine district-level public health programme monitoring conducted as part of regular supervisory activities. No experimental intervention, formal research sampling, or collection of identifiable personal data was undertaken; therefore, formal institutional ethical approval was not obtained.

Statement of informed consent

No identifiable individual-level information is reported in this article. Therefore, individual informed consent for publication was not applicable.

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