



MAIN FEATURE

Workable strategies

key to school milk success

by Karien Slabbert

More than 100 lacto-enthusiasts from across the dairy spectrum attended the inaugural Eastern and Southern Africa School Milk Conference from 27-30 September in Kampala, Uganda. The conference, organised by the Ugandan Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF), in collaboration with the Dairy Development Authority (DDA) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), focussed on realising the nutritional and economic benefits of school milk.

The conference reaffirmed the notion that the success of school milk programmes relies on various roleplayers who work together towards one common goal, without getting trapped in the potholes of previous unsuccessful programmes. The discussions on how to initiate and facilitate sustainable school milk programmes in the region have only started. The way forward for school milk on the African continent remains an open debate.

Above all, the conference propagated the idea that every country should take it upon itself to create workable strategies to custom-fit its needs. There is a strong need to move beyond the “dependency syndrome” and relieving short-term hunger, towards sustainable school feeding programmes. This notion was reaffirmed by Dr Michael Griffins from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), who said the school milk conference is “encouraging the experience of self-help.” The success, believes Griffins, is up to the individual countries.

School feeding programme administrators, milk producers and processors and delegates from government and private spheres used the conference to initiate debate, share successes and failures, highlight workable strategies and generate ideas on how school milk programmes could be sustained in the region and beyond. Long-term strategies for creating a milk drinking culture among children were also up for discussion.

The conference provided an open forum for dialogue on the benefits of well-implemented school milk programmes from an administrative and financial perspective. It also highlighted the nutritional benefits of milk, as well as safety and hygiene issues. A central discussion point was incorporating school milk initiatives into school feeding programmes. Delegates were generally optimistic about the role the dairy industry can play in development within the Eastern and

Southern African region. “We see dairy as a vehicle for social transformation and economic growth,” said Michael Baingana, Ugandan dairy farmer, promoter and co-ordinator.

Griffins believes that school milk is the most sustainable means to transform and diversify the dairy industry. “Because previous government intervention in various school milk programmes across the African continent was not successful, we need to look at different partnerships within the dairy industry. Government can set the standards and regulations, but should not be responsible for funds.” Additionally, donor support of school milk programmes and stakeholder partnership will ensure the success of the programme.

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The conference highlighted that school milk programmes not only have the ability to fuel economic growth on the African continent, it can also spark sustainable social development. Yoweri Museveni, Ugandan president, who officially opened the conference, said it was a good health boost for the children as well as the economy: “We will support the provision of milk to our school children because we will be killing two birds with one stone. Milk is good for the health of our children. Once we start providing it to children, we will create a market for our milk, thereby boosting our economy.”

The conference highlighted the fact that a handful African countries have well-established school milk programmes, while others are lagging behind due to logistical and financial obstacles. Africa still has a long way to go before school milk initiatives address the heart of the problem – feeding hungry children on a continuous basis. *DMA*