



School Meals Coalition: Nutrition, Health and Education for Every Child

Background & Rationale

In early 2020, school feeding programmes delivered more meals than ever before, to 388 million children, or one out of every two primary school children worldwide.ⁱ This historic progress was the culmination of a decade of action by governments and their partners. In Africa alone, coverage of domestic programmes was almost doubled, from reaching 38.4 million children in 2013 to 65.4 million in 2020.ⁱⁱ However, there was still work to be done. Even at the record numbers of children reached in early 2020, 73 million of the most vulnerable girls and boys in 60 lower-income and low-income countries still had no access to school meals and existing programmes needed reforms or improvements.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought this decade of progress to a sudden halt. In April 2020, during the height of the crisis, almost all countries closed their schools, leaving 370 million school children without access to the one meal a day they could rely on.

It is now clear in rich and poor countries that closing schools has had serious consequences for children that could not be overcome even with the most energetic mitigation measures. Opening schools safely, re-establishing school meals programmes and meeting the needs of those left behind has now become an urgent priority. Firm action is required to ensure that all children, with special attention to girls, will be able to return to school and get the support they need to recover from the multiple consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and be better prepared for future shocks.

Countries and partners from across the world have come together this year to respond to these needs by building a School Meals Coalition which will be launched at the 2021 Food Systems Summit.

More Than A Meal

This coalition is not just about feeding children, it's about unleashing the potential of these programmes to be transformative for the entire community. This can be done by ensuring healthy food environments in schools and promoting nutritious and sustainably produced food, diverse and

balanced diets and linking to local and seasonal production where appropriate. The coalition is also about establishing and improving nationally-owned, sustainable and effective programmes, it is not about establishing standalone projects.

Governments and partners have committed their support of this initiative because the evidence on the systemic impact of school meals programmes across multiple sectors is well documented. This coalition is based on 15 years of research by partners including the World Bank, the Partnership for Child Development of the Imperial College in London, the International Food Policy Research Institute, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and WFP.ⁱⁱⁱ The latest comprehensive evidence of the outcomes of school meals was published in 2018 by the World Bank in "Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies",^{iv} which establishes that these programmes yield benefits through at least five sectoral pathways: education; health/nutrition; gender equality; social protection; and local food systems and economies. Thus, they can contribute to the achievement of seven of the SDGs, including those related to poverty (SDG1), hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDG2), health (SDG3), education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), sustainable consumption and production (SDG12) and partnerships (SDG17).

School meals programmes help to combat child hunger, poverty, and multiple forms of malnutrition. They attract children to school and support their nutrition, learning, long-term well-being, and health. They promote gender equity by supporting girls to attend and graduate from school, thereby reducing the risk of child marriage, early pregnancies, and gender-based violence. In middle and low-income countries, every dollar invested in school meals yields 9 dollars back in social returns: healthy and educated children are more productive adults.^v

Children are not the only ones who benefit. School meals programmes can serve as springboards for food system transformation, while simultaneously improving the quality of education. Where possible and depending on the national and local markets and food systems, locally grown

food is a nutritious, healthy, and efficient way to provide school children with a daily meal while, at the same time, improving opportunities for smallholder farmers.^{vi} Local catering businesses, many led by women, are also provided with business opportunities. Where it is possible, using local, indigenous foods can help preserve food culture and protect biodiversity. School meals programmes are opportunities to teach children how to eat better while learning about sustainable lifestyles and healthy diets. They can serve as platforms, enabling a more holistic approach to child well-being through the integration of education, health, and social protection. Well-nourished children are an important investment in the individual in order to learn, earn a living and contribute to society.

In countries in conflict or dealing with crises, school meal programmes can help stabilize communities and enhance resilience. They help restore a sense of normality and stability for the most vulnerable children. Helping to keep children in school protects them against physical abuse and other risks like forced or early child marriage and labour.

Goals & Objectives

Goal: That every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030. The aim is to improve the quality of school meals and strengthen school meal systems globally, as a platform to reach communities, simultaneously transforming food, education, social protection, and health systems. The School Meals Coalition will catalyze actions and share knowledge, thereby serving as a key driver of both pandemic recovery and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Objectives.^{vii}

In order to attain its goals, the coalition of partners will endeavor to achieve the following:

— **Restore what we had (by 2023):** Support all countries to re-establish effective school meal programmes and repair what was lost during the pandemic and improve the efficiency of programmes in these countries, so they become more sustainable and self-reliant. Ensure that all countries, regardless of income level restore access to school meals programmes for the 370 million children who lost access during the pandemic.^{viii}

— **Reach those we missed (by 2030):** Reach the most vulnerable, in low and lower middle-income countries, that were not being reached even before the pandemic. Increase the efficiency of programs to enable low and lower-middle income countries to become more self-reliant. Reach 73 million girls and boys living in extreme poverty and hunger in 60 low and lower-middle income countries.^{ix}

— **Improve our approach (by 2030):** Improve the quality and efficiency of existing nationally-owned school meals

programmes in all countries by facilitating a healthy food environment in schools and promoting safe, nutritious, and sustainably produced food, diverse and balanced diets linking to local and seasonal production where appropriate. This will address all forms of malnutrition, improve opportunities for smallholder farmers, create local jobs for women entrepreneurs and add value along the entire supply chain, benefiting local economies.

Coalition at Regional & National Levels

At the national level the coalition will dock into the relevant national Ministry or institution that leads school meals initiatives. In most cases, these are Ministries of Education or Agriculture, although in some countries the responsible entity is in Presidential/Prime Ministerial offices. Over the next twelve months, countries have committed to define measurable national commitments towards the coalition through national dialogues. These commitments will then be translated into policy frameworks at national level and operational roadmaps for action.

Governments will receive support from at least 5 UN agencies that have agreed to work together in support of UN Country Teams (WFP, UNICEF, FAO, WHO and UNESCO).

School meals are also a regional priority for the African Union and recognized as an entry point for inclusive human development by the European Union. African Union Heads of State passed a landmark decision in 2016 recognizing the contribution of school meals to inclusive development, health, gender equality, and education for the most vulnerable. In March 2021, the African Union issued a communiqué calling for the creation of a School Meals Coalition at the Food Systems Summit, recognizing the need to restore and scale up programmes following the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Council meanwhile adopted council conclusions on the European Union's priorities for the 2021 Food Systems Summit in May 2021 which recognize the importance of the diets that children and adolescents need in order to grow and develop to their full potential, including through school nutrition programmes.

Coalition at the Global Level

The coalition will be broad, and government led. However, rapid progress to ensure a sustainable recovery from COVID-19 will require action by all stakeholders, including ministries, local and municipal authorities, local communities and schools, international organizations, academia, civil society, and the private sector, who are invited to join.

At the global level, the organization and management of the coalition will be supported by WFP through augmented capacity in its School-based Programmes Division in Rome, which will serve as the coordinating body for the coalition. WFP will leverage its significant presence through country,

regional and liaison offices, and work with partners, to support country efforts. It will oversee and coordinate specific initiatives designed to support country level action.

The coalition will work through initiatives that will support countries with their implementation challenges. Members of the coalition can join or contribute to any of these initiatives or establish new ones that are in line with the coalition's objectives.

The following initiatives have been, or are being launched, in 2021 by a coalition partner(s):

— **A Research Consortium:** A research consortium was launched in May 2021 and is being led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The consortium will coordinate the efforts of academia, think tanks and research partners, with a focus on the global south. It will establish a 10-year research agenda to build evidence on the impacts of school meals at large and to specifically focus on the worsened learning crisis expected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence will be disseminated widely to support decision making and improve scale and quality of programmes.

— **A Multisectoral Financing Task-force for School Health & Nutrition:** The low fiscal capacity of low-income countries for school meals and school health is the most important challenge to the scale-up and transition to national school meals programmes. A task-force is being established under the leadership of the Global Education Forum to improve donor coordination, the efficiency of current funding arrangements, help countries increase their fiscal capacity through innovative solutions, and help marshal resources necessary to address this global challenge.

— **A Monitoring & Accountability Mechanism:** The World Food Programme (WFP) is developing a global school meals database in partnership with Dubai Cares, the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition and regional groups like the African Union and the African Union Development Agency (AUDA/NEPAD), which will be used to track and monitor coalition accomplishments. This work will be advanced with partners. WFP will also publish the report, "State of School Feeding Worldwide", every two years which will serve as the reporting mechanism for the coalition, and which will feed into the broader Food Systems Summit follow up mechanism. The latest edition of the report, published in 2021, serves as the global baseline for the coalition's work and the establishment of targets.

— **An Advocacy & Outreach Task-force:** An expert level task-force of the coalition is working to position school meals in global fora and advance the goals and objective of the coalition. Opportunities may include the UN Food Systems Summit, Nutrition for Growth Summit, G7 and G20 meetings and others.

— **A Peer-to-peer Community of Best Practice:** A member states led peer-to-peer network will be established by Germany to share lessons learned from national and local contexts and to inform and disseminate evidence-based policy and programme standards and guidance to strengthen school meals programmes. Learning from approaches like south-south and triangular cooperation, the network will bring together partners such as the Centers of Excellence in Brazil and Cote d'Ivoire and others, will improve the linkages between education, agriculture, health, and nutrition and support integrated programmes and policies.

Partners

All members of the coalition have signed a Declaration of Commitment signaling their support. As of 03 September, 56 countries have signed the Declaration of Commitment, at head of state or ministerial level.^x The coalition has the backing of H.E. President Macron of France, H.E. President Kagame of Rwanda, and H.E. President Sall of Senegal, among other world leaders. Over 42 partners including major UN agencies, academia, civil society, regional bodies, and private sector have signed Declarations of Support to the coalition. WFP, UNICEF, FAO, UNESCO and WHO are signing a specific declaration of support which also specifies how they will work together to support country efforts. The coalition has reached out to groups representing indigenous peoples, women, and youth to ensure that they are well represented.

A final call to action

The road back from the damage wrought by Covid-19 will be long, and uneven. One of the most important contributions to recovery governments and their partners can make, is reestablishing school meals programs. These programs work. They change lives, for children, and communities. Simply put, restoring and establishing school meals programs is among the most important contributions the world can make to secure the future for our children and our societies.



Additional information

Representatives of governments, civil society, academia and the private sector interesting in joining this effort are invited to contact us and learn more, including on ways to support the coalition heading into the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021, at carmen.burbano@wfp.org and/or altan.butt@wfp.org

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- ⁱ **WFP.** 2021. State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020. Available at: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2020>
- ⁱⁱ **African Union.** 2021. African Union Biennial Report on Home-grown School Feeding. Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/40022-doc-final_biannual_report.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ For a summary of evidence published since 2009 please see:
- (i) Bundy, D. Burbano, C. et al. 2009 Rethinking School Feeding Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector. Directions in Development. World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2634>
- (ii) State of School Feeding Worldwide 2013. WFP. 2013 <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2013>
- (iii) Drake, L.; Woolnough, A.; Burbano, C.; Bundy, D. 2016. Global School Feeding Sourcebook : Lessons from 14 Countries. London: Imperial College Press. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24418>
- (iv) Bundy, D et al. Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies". World Bank. 2018 <http://dcp-3.org/schoolfeeding>
- (v) Home-Grown School Feeding Resource Framework. FAO and WFP. 2018. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CA0957EN/>
- (vi) State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020. WFP. 2020 <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2020>
- (vii) How Many Poor Children Globally Could Benefit from New Generation School Feeding Programmes, and What Would be the Cost? Frontiers in Public Health. 2020
- (viii) Comprehensive Economic Evaluation of School Feeding Program Costs and Benefits in 14 Low- and Middle-Income Countries". Economics Working Paper. Harvard School of Public Health. 2020
- ^{iv} **Bundy, D.A.P., de Silva, N., Horton, S., Jamison, D.T. and Patton, G.C.** 2018. "Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies". Washington, DC, World Bank
- ^v **Verguet, S., Drake, L.J., Limasalle, P., Chakrabarti, A., Bundy, D.A.P.** 2020. Comprehensive Economic Evaluation of School Feeding Program Costs and Benefits in 14 Low- and Middle-Income Countries. Economics Working Paper. Harvard School of Public Health.
- ^{vi} **WFP, FAO, IFAD, NEPAD, GCNF and PCD.** 2018. Home-Grown School Feeding Resource Framework. Technical Document. Rome. Available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000074274/download/>
- ^{vii} For more information on the targets and how they were established, please refer to the companion paper "Facts and figures of the Coalition for School Feeding".
- ^{viii} **WFP.** 2020. Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures. Available at: <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>
- ^{ix} **Drake, L., Fernandes, M., Chu, K., Lazrak, N., Singh, S., Ryckembusch, D., Burbano, C. and Bundy, D.A.P.** 2020. How Many Poor Children Globally Could Benefit from New Generation School Feeding Programmes, and What Would be the Cost? Frontiers in Public Health.
- ^x **Countries include:** DRC, Ethiopia, Finland, Honduras, Monaco, Senegal, Sweden, Timor-Leste, African Union, Namibia, Guinea, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Rwanda, Madagascar, Kenya, El Salvador, Germany, Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Somalia, Republic of Congo, Morocco, Denmark, Philippines, Panama, Benin, Norway, Brazil, Nepal, Burundi, Bhutan, Cambodia, Gambia, Pakistan, Iceland, France, USA, Guatemala, South Africa, Turkey, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovenia, Thailand, Japan, Kuwait, Angola, Egypt, Russia, Japan, Argentina, Colombia, Cameroon and Chile.
- Stakeholders include:** UNICEF, WFP, FAO, WHO, UNESCO, UN Nutrition, Education Cannot Wait, AUDA NEPAD, Dubai Cares, AVSI, War Child, University of Leeds, Schools of Food Science and Nutrition, and Psychology/WHO Collaborating Centre for Nutrition Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine/Global Research Consortium, PCD, Canadian Coalition for Healthy School Food, Global Child Nutrition Forum, USA Food Systems for the Future, OSAA – USG Special Advisor Africa Affairs, Chefs Manifesto SDG2Hub, Copenhagen Business School, Plan International, EAT Forum, Andre Food International, Mary's Meals, OXFAM, World Fish Malaysia, Catholic Relief Services, University of Toronto, C40, ADRA, Stop Hunger Foundation, JAM International, City of Milan, DSM, Gain, World Vision, IFAD, The Global Food Banking Network, Kitchen Connection, Northumbria University, Save the Children, International Dairy Foods Association Foundation, and Global Partnership for Education (GPE)