



1.12 Implement comprehensive school food programmes in every country

The Solution: This solution seeks to leverage the currently insufficiently tapped transformative power of “school food systems” by dramatically improving the impact of school food programmes in every country. This solution builds extensive existing knowledge, guidance, structures, and networks that foster contextually relevant and sustainable networks of exchange and technical advice in support of national legal frameworks on financing and governance and local ownership and innovation. In so doing it will benefit the diets, development, and longer-term food literacy of millions of children and bring co-benefits across the food system for livelihoods and environmental sustainability.

Source of the Solution: During a working group meeting, the importance of focusing on schools emerged. When Irish Baguilat joined the group, she volunteered to take the idea forward, given her depth of experience working with school food programmes. Irish consulted extensively, including WFP, FAO, Chile, and experts outside of the working group to develop the solution.

Problem addressed within food systems: Low, variable, and unpredictable incomes and lack of capacity and assets limit the foods that households can afford and prepare. Providing meals at school means children in these households have access to healthy food and are more likely to attend school. Providing education and skills on nutrition is vital to equip children with knowledge, to enhance the appeal of nutritious foods, and to reduce their aspiration and access to unhealthy foods. Schools (and childcare centres) are leverage points for food systems transformation. Already, most countries have programmes providing food, undertaking a vast amount of food procurement and reaching millions of children with food that is often unaffordable or inaccessible at home. Schools are a site where children can be educated about the food system, becoming food literate through nutrition education, food skills, and school gardens. Taking a comprehensive approach to school food programmes can reap multiple benefits for the food system, enhancing food security and nutrition, school attendance, nutrition education, gender equality, livelihoods of producers, and environmental sustainability.

Yet its enormous potential is inadequately recognised. Many countries with school food programmes have no cohesive framework defining the source of funding or budget allocation. The programmes do not explicitly outline roles, responsibilities, and coordination. The food supplied may be of poor quality with no nutritional guidelines. The opportunity to provide guaranteed markets for producers and/or enhance environmental sustainability is underutilised. Often, school-based interventions and food literacy and nutrition education are fragmented and ineffective. Thus, the maximum benefits for child nutrition are not being reaped. However, there are plenty of examples of good practice that could be exchanged across countries.

How this solution will address that problem: This solution will address the problem by ensuring children are benefitting from comprehensive school programmes sustained over time while creating co-benefits across food systems. School food programmes have existed for decades; the gamechanger here is to find a way to build on existing structures to unlock the bottleneck to their implementation, effectiveness, and sustainability as an agent of food system change. The intended impact is that school-aged children eat more nutritious diets and encourage their families to do so, forming healthy habits for life. This would emerge if healthy school meals/food were provided in a healthy school environment accompanied by innovative nutrition education and food literacy. The elements needed to make these programmes work for nutrition would be: (a) provision of tasty, nutritious, affordable and sustainable food that appeals to children, with nutrition guidelines; (b) a strong food literacy curriculum (e.g., nutrition education, taste education, food skills, school gardens, agriculture-based education); (c) complementary school-based



interventions (e.g., WASH, health); (d) procurement mechanisms to guarantee markets for preferred providers, such farmer groups (e.g., brokers, cooperatives); and (e) participatory monitoring, capitalising on digital technologies. The theory is that these elements could be delivered effectively if school food programmes benefitted from (a) a stable budget; (b) local capacity to adapt the programme to local contexts; and (c) regional networks fostering exchange of lessons learned and technical advice. Benefits would also accrue for producers and, where relevant, environmental sustainability.

This proposal draws on extensive experience of school food programmes at international (e.g., FAO, WFP, C40), regional, and national levels. That experience makes it clear that school food programmes vary enormously between and within countries (e.g., in some countries they are run nationally and in others locally) and there is no one size fits all. However, three inputs, all taken forward together, would be game changing in unlocking the bottlenecks to change:

- 1) A national legal framework on budget, roles, and responsibilities. Legislation is needed to sustain budgets through political cycles and clarify who pays and how money is spent. Clarity is needed on who (e.g., donors, education departments, city governments) has responsibility for the different elements.
- 2) Localisation to ensure the programme delivers multiple benefits in context. To benefit from local knowledge and encourage ownership, action research should be used to develop local prototypes to deliver the elements effectively with a critical mass of schools and multiple actors, which can then be scaled through learning circles and teacher-to-teacher extension. Mechanisms would be needed for multi-level coordination.
- 3) Regional networks of champions to foster exchange and support with stakeholders from local schools, city-level networks, and national programmes along with political figures and institutions identified as ‘champions,’ supported by regional bodies, to foster exchange of lessons learned and provide technical assistance.

Solution’s alignment to the ‘game changing and systemic solution’ criteria: This solution is game changing in that it builds on existing models but departs from existing practices by being comprehensive, addressing a long-term constraint through sustained financing, and being more effective through local-level adaptation.

Impact potential at scale: It would cover millions of schools everywhere.

Actionability: The fact that making this happen has proven difficult suggests the need for a more concerted, coordinated approach, but there are already scores of existing initiatives that would support it. The frameworks, tools, knowledge, and networks needed are largely already there.

Sustainability: The solution will call for a legally embedded financing model.

Co-benefits - While costly, there are no apparent negative trade-offs but potential positive spill-over impacts, such as enhancing livelihoods of producers serving the schools; providing opportunities to procure nature-friendly food; and providing income for women who work in school food while reducing the burden on women who lead food preparation at home.

Existing evidence: The benefits of school food programmes are well documented (education and gender equality, health, and nutrition; social protection; local economies and agriculture). Guidance and evidence of best practice exists on sourcing foods for school meals locally, which broaden their benefits to the local economy by providing structured demand, stable markets, and income opportunities. Brazil’s model of linking school feeding and farmers and scaling out to neighbouring countries demonstrates that the



approach can work logistically. Local experience suggests that local ownership is necessary for an effective model.

Current/likely political support: School food programmes exist in many countries. There are many different networks at regional, national and city levels and major international agencies have programmes on school food. These institutions and networks have offered their support of this solution, including FAO, WFP, ICLEI, and C40 (the latter focusing on local government/city-level support, given municipal governments often have delegated authority for schools). A new World Coalition on School Nutrition has just been formed, led by Germany. Chile and China have expressed an interest in championing a comprehensive, sustained approach as part of the FSS. The Summit offers an opportunity to consolidate this significant existing support and work to take it to the next level.

Contexts for which this is well suited: One of the benefits of the approach is that schools exist everywhere across low-, middle-, and high-income countries.