

School meals: A toolkit for parliamentarians



School meals: A toolkit for parliamentarians was developed by the International Parliamentary Network for Education with the support of the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition and the World Food Programme, as a contribution to the work of the School Meals Coalition.



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The International Parliamentary Network for Education (IPNEd) consists of parliamentarians from around the world who are committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 -Quality Education For All. IPNEd works to mobilise political leadership to accelerate quality education in four mutually supportive ways:

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- Facilitating collective, cross-party action by parliamentarians including collaboration with stakeholders outside of parliaments, building broad alliances that support sustained political commitment to, and leadership on, education.
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School
Meals
Coalition
Nutrition, Health and
Education for Every Child

The School Meals Coalition is a government-led initiative, which was launched at the United Nations Food Systems Summit in September 2021 under the leadership of Finland and France.

Through its partner-led initiatives, the SMC supports member states to address key bottlenecks to action by supporting better evidence on impact and value-for-money to guide decision making sustainable financing to better coordinate domestic and international funding reliable data, and sharing good practices across municipalities to support sub-national programming.

Partners include stakeholders from academia, international organisations, and civil society willing to align themselves with the goals and objectives of the Coalition.

For more information on the Coalition including its growing membership, partner led initiatives and how to join visit www.schoolmealscoalition.org

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About this toolkit

School meals and complementary programmes can contribute to children's learning by improving their health and well-being when they are in school and being educated. Investing in good health and nutrition developed during the school years can lead to a long and healthy life.

Possible at scale

Many countries have shown that school meals can be delivered at scale. Presently one-in-two primary school children receive a meal daily in school, and the majority of programs are funded through national budgets.¹

School meals benefit entire communities

Well-designed school meal programmes are one of the most impactful and efficient interventions to benefit entire communities and can contribute directly to the achievement of at least nine of the Sustainable Development Goals; catalysing progress on poverty (SDG1), hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDG2), health (SDG3), education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), sustainable consumption and production (SDG12), climate action (SDG13), peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) and partnerships (SDG17).

COVID 19 school closures impact school meals

In addition to the devastating impact on children's learning, school closures as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the importance of the daily meal that 388 million children were receiving every day at school, before the pandemic.²

Creation of School Meals Coalition

In 2021 a group of 46 countries and the African Union together with UN agencies, academic partners and civil society organisations, launched the School Meals Coalition - a multilateral initiative committed to ensuring that every child in the world has the opportunity to receive a healthy nutritious meal in school, every day.

At the time of publication the Coalition counts 97 countries, 3 regional bodies, and 124 partner organisations among its members.

Restoring school meal programmes

Amongst the Coalition's initial aims was the restoration of school meal programmes to pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, only one year after the establishment of the Coalition, this aim was achieved when data revealed that 30 million more children received a meal at school than in early 2020 before schools closed due to the COVID pandemic.³

This was a remarkable achievement and points to the growing recognition at the highest levels of the value of school meals. However, much remains to be done to sustain this progress and expand the reach and improve the quality of school meal programmes.



In 2022, 30 million more children received a meal at school than in early 2020 when the COVID pandemic closed schools.

The two other aims of the School Meals Coalition are to:

- Expand global school meals coverage to the 73 million children most vulnerable school children, who did not receive school meals even prior to the pandemic; and
- improve the quality of school meals programmes worldwide.

Key to achieving these aims will be increasing parliamentary support for school meals. Members of parliament have a central part to play as advocates and representatives and in exercising their unique power to legislate, budget and scrutinise government action in support of school meals.

With this in mind, the toolkit has three parts:

(1) An introduction to school meals

Part one provides a brief introduction to school meal programmes including how meals are provided and funded and the difference between universal and targeted eligibility for free or subsidised school meals.

(2) The case for school meals

Part two sets out the overwhelming evidence that well-designed and effectively delivered school meals programmes offer exceptionally high returns on investment along with the potential for large-scale benefits across a range of priority policy areas, including; Human Capital, Education, Healthy growth and development, Social protection, Agriculture, Climate and the environment, Supporting education during crises and conflict and Gender equality.

(3) Actionable advice and guidance

Part three of the toolkit explores how members of parliament can exercise their core responsibilities to represent their constituents, advocate, legislate, budget and provide oversight of government action on school meals. This part is divided into two sections; The first sets out how parliamentarians can expand and improve school meals programmes in their own country or region. The second section has suggestions for how members of parliament in donor countries can increase humanitarian and development funding and support for school meals.

Who is the toolkit for?

The toolkit has been designed to support members in national or sub-national parliaments.

The toolkit will also be useful for parliamentary staff and office holders as well as stakeholders outside of parliament looking to work with members of parliament to expand and improve the delivery of school meals.

It has been informed by a wide range of inputs from individual experts and organisations which are acknowledged at the end of the toolkit.

Who is the toolkit from?

The toolkit was developed by:



International
Parliamentary
Network for
Education

With the support of the:

LONDON
SCHOOL of
HYGIENE
& TROPICAL
MEDICINE



Research
Consortium for
SHN

As a contribution to the work of the:



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



**World Food
Programme**

Executive Summary

When the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, school feeding programs were delivering more meals than ever before, but the COVID-19 pandemic brought this decade of global progress to a sudden halt.

The absence of school meals shone a spotlight on the importance of the daily meal that 388 million children were receiving every day at school, before the pandemic.¹

In response to this massive crisis, a group of governments came together to launch the School Meals Coalition during the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit. The Coalition's aim is to ensure that every child can receive a healthy meal in school by 2030.

One of the Coalition's first objectives was the restoration of school meal programmes to pre-pandemic levels. The latest available data on the reach of school meals shows that 30 million more children receive a meal at school today than when schools closed in early 2020.²

This remarkable achievement has been driven by national political leadership at the highest level supported by the School Meals Coalition. However, much remains to be done to sustain this progress and expand the reach and improve the quality of school meal programmes and members of parliament have a central part to play in this effort.

'School meals: A toolkit for parliamentarians' provides members of parliament with the evidence to make the case for school meals along with actionable advice and guidance to support them to:

- represent,
- advocate,
- legislate and
- budget in support of school meal programmes.

It also includes suggestions for how members of parliament can exercise their oversight function to ensure that school meals programmes are efficiently and effectively implemented.



Members of parliament have a central role to play in the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes.

The case for school meals

Exceptionally high returns on investment

Properly designed school meals programmes that improve the well-being and education of students can offer returns of between \$7 and \$35 for each \$1 invested.³ This return on investment is so large because school meals address multiple policy challenges and provide benefits to several sectors.



An investment in human capital

Human capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realise their potential.

Human capital is a central driver of sustainable growth and poverty reduction. It helps prepare citizens for the more highly skilled jobs of the future, which can drive more sustained growth and transform the trajectory of individuals, households and entire economies.

A quality education, combined with a guaranteed package of health and nutrition interventions at school, such as school feeding, contributes to the two building blocks that make up human capital, education and health.⁴



Improving enrolment, retention and learning in school

Many children still do not have access to education, and for many who do they are not learning the basics. It is estimated that 70% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple text.⁵

School meals make it easier for children to attend school every day, remain for the entire school day, concentrate while in school, participate and learn. These benefits are particularly high for children and families from vulnerable groups as well as girls.⁶



Securing healthy growth and development

The window from conception to two years of age, known as the first 1,000 days, is critical to a child's health and development.

However, we know that this is not enough. To sustain early gains, provide opportunities to catch-up and to address additional phases of vulnerability, such as puberty, it is important to also support the health and nutrition of children and adolescents during the next 7,000 days.⁷

High-quality school meals can deliver immediate, lifelong and intergenerational benefits for children's health and development by addressing nutritional deficiencies, reducing diet-related non-communicable diseases, and establishing lifelong preferences for healthy food.⁸



Delivering an effective social safety net

Economic downturns, food insecurity, conflicts and climate extremes all threaten the livelihoods and wellbeing of households globally, disproportionately affecting low-income families and their children.

Given these multiple challenges there is an urgent need to support families, and school meals are one effective and scalable method for doing so.

The value of one child being fed at school represents between 8% to 16% of household income in low-income settings.⁹ School meal programs are already among the largest and most effective social safety nets reaching 41 per cent of the world's children.¹⁰



Supporting local agriculture and food systems

In many developing countries, smallholder farmers, most of which are women, are constrained by insufficient access to finance, limited education and lack of access to markets, agricultural inputs, and technology.¹¹

At the same time, climate extremes pose a serious threat to their livelihoods. School meals programmes can be designed to deliver extensive benefits to local food systems and the local economy, by supporting the livelihoods of farmers and others in food value chains, improving food security and providing local employment. School meal programmes have created approximately four million direct jobs in 85 countries, which equates to between 1,000 to 2,000 jobs for every 100,000 children fed.¹²



Tackling climate change and improving sustainability

Climate change poses serious challenges for education and food security. A warming world increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, which impacts the education of 40 million children annually, mostly in low and lower middle-income countries.¹³

Climate change also poses significant challenges to global food security. Long-term changes in temperature, humidity, rainfall patterns and the frequency of extreme weather events are already affecting farming practices, crop production and the nutritional quality of food crops.

Planet-friendly school meals can reduce emissions and promote more sustainable food systems and diets through menu design, clean cooking practices, reducing waste, and empowering school children. These changes can collectively support sustainable farming, driving a shift towards more planet-friendly agriculture and procurement practices.¹⁴



Supporting education during crises, building peace and social cohesion

Armed conflict, climate change, and disease are causing unprecedented levels of forced displacement which in turn disrupts education systems, depriving children of the opportunity to learn.¹⁵

222 million crisis-affected children are in need of educational assistance.¹⁶

School meals can play a vital role in emergency and crisis contexts, providing life-enhancing safety nets that supply children with nutrition and support their education. School meals programmes also contribute to reducing conflicts by increasing trust in institutions through effective and equitable public service delivery, by creating a sense of normalcy, and by promoting a peaceful community of children sharing daily meals with each other.¹⁷



Advancing gender equality

Globally, women and girls face systemic disadvantages, due to poverty, unequal power relations, and discriminatory social and gender norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices.¹⁸

School meals programmes can help to advance gender equality by supporting girls' education, health and employment.

By reducing the opportunity cost of participating in school, school meals make girls' attendance possible and encourage families and communities to support it. Data from 32 sub-Saharan countries showed in-school meals combined with take-home rations increased the enrolment of girls by 12%.¹⁹

School meals also address the nutritional challenges girls face, as programmes can ensure girls receive adequate and gender-sensitive nutrition which support their health and development.²⁰

Parliamentary action in support of school meals

The evidence of the benefits of school meals is clear but it needs to inform concerted action to accelerate the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes. Members of parliament have a central part to play in this effort.

They can exercise their unique responsibilities to represent their communities, act as advocates, make and pass laws, and shape and approve national budgets, as well as provide oversight of government policy and action to support the creation, expansion and improvement of school meal programmes.



Representation

Parliamentarians have an important role to play in representing the interests of their constituents, amplifying the demand for school meal programmes.

Members of parliament can exercise their representational role by:

- Speaking to constituents about the value of school meals programmes, how they could be designed and delivered if they don't already exist and how they could be expanded and improved if they do.
- Soliciting disaggregated evidence, data and analysis from research networks and other relevant stakeholders to assess the current state of child and adolescent nutrition which can be used to frame the child health and development challenges that school meals can help solve.
- Sharing the interest in and support for school meals from external stakeholders, including groups from your constituency, in parliament and with the government, including the responsible minister.



Advocacy

School meal programmes need advocates - individuals who are prepared to make the case for school meals, urging decision makers such as ministers and/or officials to expand and/or improve school meals. Members of parliament can advocate for the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes by:

- Learning about the multisectoral benefits of school meals so that you can be an informed advocate.
- Identifying the stakeholders in your constituency, nationally and internationally who have an interest in school meals and who you can work with to create coalitions for change.
- Advocating for school meals in the media and using your social media and other communication channels.
- Identifying and working with other members of your parliament, parliaments in your region and parliamentarians internationally to advocate for school meals.
- Using the opportunities your parliament provides such as motions, questions, debates and committee initiatives to share the benefits of school meals and to urge action in support of a school meals programme in your context.



Legislation

Parliamentarians play a key role in the implementation and delivery of public services by making or reforming laws that govern those services. Laws translate political commitment for school meals into action mandated, financed, and overseen by parliament and help to ensure the effective delivery, long-term sustainability, and success of these programmes.

Members of parliament can support the development, passage and implementation of legislation in support of school meals by:

- Establishing the policy objectives for the school meal program you want to create, expand or improve.
- Assessing existing legal provisions to determine whether any relevant laws or regulations exist, what opportunities and challenges they pose and what new laws or reforms to existing laws are needed to develop or improve the legal framework for school meals.
- Consulting with the executive branch and stakeholder groups, including both experts and constituents, to identify legislative gaps and prioritise legislative needs.
- Considering whether this work could be done by a parliamentary committee and explore whether the committee is prepared to launch an inquiry into or examination of school meals.
- Working with the relevant ministry and the appropriate parliamentary authorities to draft legislation, including a framework law and reforms to other law to create a legal basis for the school meals programme.

Collaborating within and across regions and work with regional and international parliamentary institutions to share lessons learned and experiences in legislating for school meals and school health and nutrition more widely, such as motions, questions, debates and committee initiatives to share the benefits of school meals and to urge action in support of a school meals programme in your context.



Budget

Budget appropriation and enquiry are powerful tools parliamentarians have at their disposal. There are multiple steps in the budget cycle – planning, negotiation, spending and review – at which parliamentarians can shape and make budget-related decisions in support of school meals.

Members of parliament can support the financing of school meal programmes by:

- Working with government and external experts such as the School Meals Coalition Sustainable Financing Initiative to establish the cost of the desired school meals programme, ensuring all costs are included, both as a whole and on a per child basis.
- Agreeing on the objectives of your school meal programme and using these to shape how you will allocate the available funding.
- Agreeing that the school meal programme is a national multisectoral priority and will have its own budget that must be supported over time.
- Identifying the benefits of the programme for the work of other ministries and work to secure their support for the programme.
- If required, exploring the creation of specific funding streams to support the programme, including innovative funding sources.
- If you live in a country that receives donor funding, share your support for school feeding with donor representatives and invite them to support the funding of the programme.
- Tracking and analysing budgets to ascertain the amount of money allocated or needed to implement a school meal programme.

If a programme exists ask schools about how the funding is delivered and monitored sharing what you find, both the challenges and what's going well, in parliament and with the responsible Minister. This activity could be undertaken by a parliamentary committee.

Oversight

Parliamentary oversight has an important part to play in holding the government accountable for its actions in respect of school meal programming and for ensuring that the government implements its policies in accordance with the laws and budget for school meals passed by the parliament.

Members of parliament can help ensure that school meal programmes are implemented effectively by:

- Establishing clear processes and mechanisms in legislation to monitor and enforce the implementation of school meal programmes.
- Monitoring and evaluating the short- and long- term effects of laws, in collaboration with independent research institutes, like the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition.
- Using parliamentary procedures to scrutinise the government's policies, legislation, implementation and financing of school meals.
- Using parliamentary committees (such as health, food security and nutrition, education, children) to examine the state of child health and nutrition of if it already exists of the school feeding programme.
- Holding decision makers accountable and develop scorecard systems to make sure political commitments to nutrition and food systems are being realised.
- Establishing contact with the audit institution that reports to parliament and explore whether an audit into an existing school meal programme or an examination of the cost and benefits of establishing a programme.

Growing global support for school meals

School meals offer a scalable solution to a wide range of global development challenges. Members of parliament in OECD countries have an important role to play in growing awareness of the contribution that school meals can make to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in general and specifically to tackling low levels of learning and high rates of malnutrition and poverty in developing countries.

Members of parliament in OECD country parliaments can grow development and humanitarian assistance for school meals by:

- Calling on their government to join the School Meals Coalition and announce how as a member it will support the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes globally.
- If their country is already a member of the School Meals Coalition, monitor the implementation of its stated pledges, including by asking the Minister for Development about them.
- Encouraging their governments to develop and agree a policy setting out its support for school meals as part of the country's development and humanitarian assistance policy.
- Ensuring that school meals are supported in issue and sector specific policies.
- Asking their government to work with the OECD Development Assistance Committee reporting system to better capture aid flows to school feeding programmes.
- Committing to financing school meals via their development and humanitarian funding.
- Asking their government to work with the World bank to prioritise school feeding.
- Supporting low and lower middle-income countries make the transition towards domestic financing based on clear national commitments and multi-year financing aligned with a national strategy.
- Advocating for the recognition of the transformative role of cross-sectoral programmes like school meals in the next generation of SDGs.

Parliaments key to harnessing the potential of school meals

Well-designed and properly funded school meal programmes have the potential to unlock a virtuous and self-reinforcing cycle of progress across all the areas detailed in this toolkit.

By understanding the benefits of school meals and using their position to amplify the aspirations of their constituents, members of parliament have an important role to play in growing political commitment to school meal programmes.

They are uniquely placed to turn that commitment into legislation, backed by funding and can then ensure that the programme is in fact properly delivered. This is an invitation to members of parliament globally to be part of achieving transformative changes in the future of children and the development of nations.



Members of parliament can act as advocates, make and pass laws, shape and approve national budgets, as well as provide oversight of government policy to support the creation, expansion and improvement of school meal programmes.

(1) An introduction to school meals

1.1 What are school meal programmes?

School meals involve the provision of meals or take-home rations through schools to children who are attending school. Nearly every country in the world offers some form of school-based health and nutrition intervention to support learners. By 2020, one-in-two children were receiving a meal in school every day.⁴ School meals represent a USD 48 billion industry annually.

The vast majority of school feeding programmes around the world are operated by national governments, with 98% of the cost of school meal programmes coming from domestic, national government budgets. Programmes in middle- and high-income countries are almost universally supported through domestic funds.⁵ Development assistance has an important part to play in supporting the funding of school meals in low- and lower-middle-income countries and in humanitarian contexts.

1.1.1 Delivery modality

School meals can involve the provision of food to children either **in a school setting**, or as a **take-home ration** or a combination of the two.



Meals delivered in a school setting

Children may receive breakfast, lunch, or a combination in school. According to a recent survey covering 125 countries, breakfast programs are offered in nearly 40% of the countries surveyed, offering particular benefit to children at-risk of coming to school on an empty stomach.⁶ School meals can be prepared in school, in the community or be delivered from centralised kitchens or caterers. The provision of in school meals may require investments in kitchen infrastructure, measures that ensure food storage, safety, and quality, procurement and financial management guidelines, and the presence of a suitably trained workforce/provider. Though actual meals are recommended, in some cases schools may provide high energy biscuits or snacks, which can be fortified with micronutrients that try to address nutritional deficiencies. Other schools can provide packed meals for children.



Take-home rations

In these programmes, children receive food commodities to take home. Take-home rations encourage desired behaviours (such as sending girls to school) and are conditional upon school enrolment and attendance. Take-home rations can be combined with in school meals for particularly vulnerable students.

Take-home rations are often used during emergencies to ensure children continue to attend school and that households impacted by an emergency receive food. An analysis of school meals programmes across 32 sub-Saharan countries showed on-site meals combined with take-home rations increased the enrolment of girls by 12%.⁷

1.1.2 Eligibility

In funding the provision of school meals governments can choose to fund all the costs of the programme, making them either entirely free for the child or paying for some of the costs of the programme, with the expectation that households also contribute.

Governments also need to decide whether all children or a selection of children will benefit from the free or subsidised meal.

Universal school meals programmes ensure distributional equity whilst lowering the cost per meal due to economies of scale. Universal delivery also supports social cohesion through shared meals and eliminates the stigma that arises from eligibility criteria.

In contrast, targeting programmes might base eligibility on household income, geographic location, health, or education indicators or on a specific group of children. Targeted meals may be provided at no cost, while other programs provide reduced-price meals.

Today, 186 million children receive school meals through universal programmes – more than 44% of all school meals delivered daily.⁸

The issues of funding of and eligibility to school meals are explored in more detail in part three of the document on financing.



The food that is provided as part of a school meal programme determines the cost, quality and nutritional value of the meal.

1.1.3 Menus

The food that is provided as part of a school meal programme determines the cost, quality and nutritional value of the meal along with the social and economic impact of the programme on the local economy and society.

Programme designers have to consider a number of criteria for menu development, including:

- programme objectives;
- nutritional requirements;
- cultural considerations and preferences;
- existing national (food-based) dietary guidelines;
- the potential to procure food from smallholder farmers;
- seasonality;
- price and the impact of price fluctuations;
- storage and handling requirements;
- vulnerability to food safety and quality issues;
- preparation requirements and challenges.

1.1.4 Policies

A renewed focus on school feeding provides an important opportunity to revisit national policies and systems as well as planning for the long-term sustainability of school meal programmes.

More and more governments are developing policies to ensure the sustainability of school meals programmes.

In 2022, 82% of low-income countries had a school meals policy and more than 87% of all countries at all income levels had a specific school feeding policy in place, showcasing the strong political commitment from governments.⁹

Strong national school feeding programmes have a national policy framework including stable and predictable funding, leadership from a national government entity, an institutional coordination mechanism, solid programme design, implementation, and monitoring, coupled with community participation to make them sustainable.

(1) An introduction to school meals

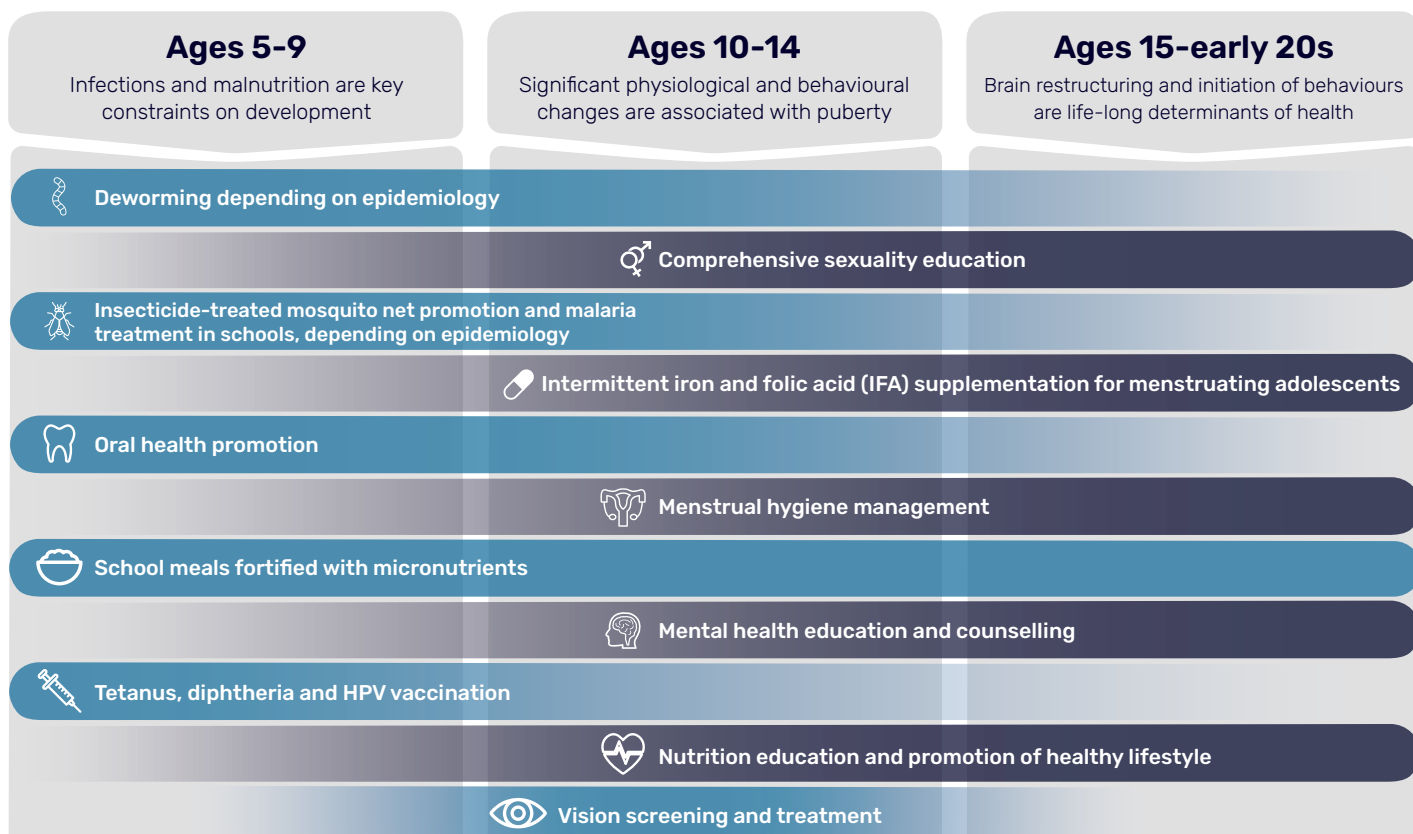
Link to wider school health and nutrition interventions

Because schools present an ideal channel to deliver a coordinated response to multiple challenges, school meals often form part of wider school health and nutrition programmes.

Complimentary school-based interventions may include deworming, height and weight measurements, drinking water, sanitation, hygiene, and handwashing, dental cleaning, hearing and vision screening, micronutrient supplementation, nutrition education, vaccinations or comprehensive sexuality education, complemented by referral to sexual and reproductive health services.



Schools provide an ideal platform to protect and promote the health, nutrition, well-being and development of students.



Source: Research Consortium for School Health & Nutrition ¹⁰

(2) The case for school meals

2.1 Growing support for school meals

Nearly every country in the world offers some form of school-based health and nutrition intervention to support the learner and their learning.¹¹ In 2020, one-in-two children were receiving a meal in school every day.¹² School closures in response to the global pandemic suddenly stopped national programmes, and in response, a global Coalition of 97 countries emerged to ensure every child has the opportunity to have a nutritious meal in school by 2030.

In 2020, nearly every country offered some form of school-based or school-linked health service to improve the physical health and nutritional status of school-going students.¹³ School meals represented the most widely offered intervention, reaching 388 million children each day, translating to one-in-two primary school students worldwide.¹⁴

When the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, school meal programmes were supporting more children than ever before, but the COVID 19 pandemic brought the delivery of this vital service to a sudden halt.

During the pandemic period, an estimated 370 million children in 161 countries lost access to what was for many their only dependable meal of the day.¹⁵ Despite the cessation of almost all school meal programmes worldwide when schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, school feeding is again one of the largest and most widespread social safety nets in the world.¹⁶

The number of children being reached by school meal programmes now exceeds pre-pandemic levels and some of the damage resulting from school closures is being repaired.

418 million children now benefit from school meals worldwide, which is 30 million more than the 388 million children reached before the pandemic in early 2020.¹⁷ This is a remarkable achievement and points to the growing recognition at the highest levels of the value of school meals.



School feeding is one of the largest and most widespread social safety net in the world.

2.2 Exceptionally high returns on investment

The return on investment for school meal programmes is estimated to be between \$7 and \$35 for every \$1 invested.¹⁸ This is because of the multitude of benefits of school meal programmes for a range of sectors.

School meals are one component of a comprehensive package of health and nutrition services delivered in schools. In practice, school feeding has emerged as the main intervention for children in schools around which other elements, such as deworming or micronutrient supplementation, are delivered. One-in-two children worldwide are fed in school each day.¹⁹

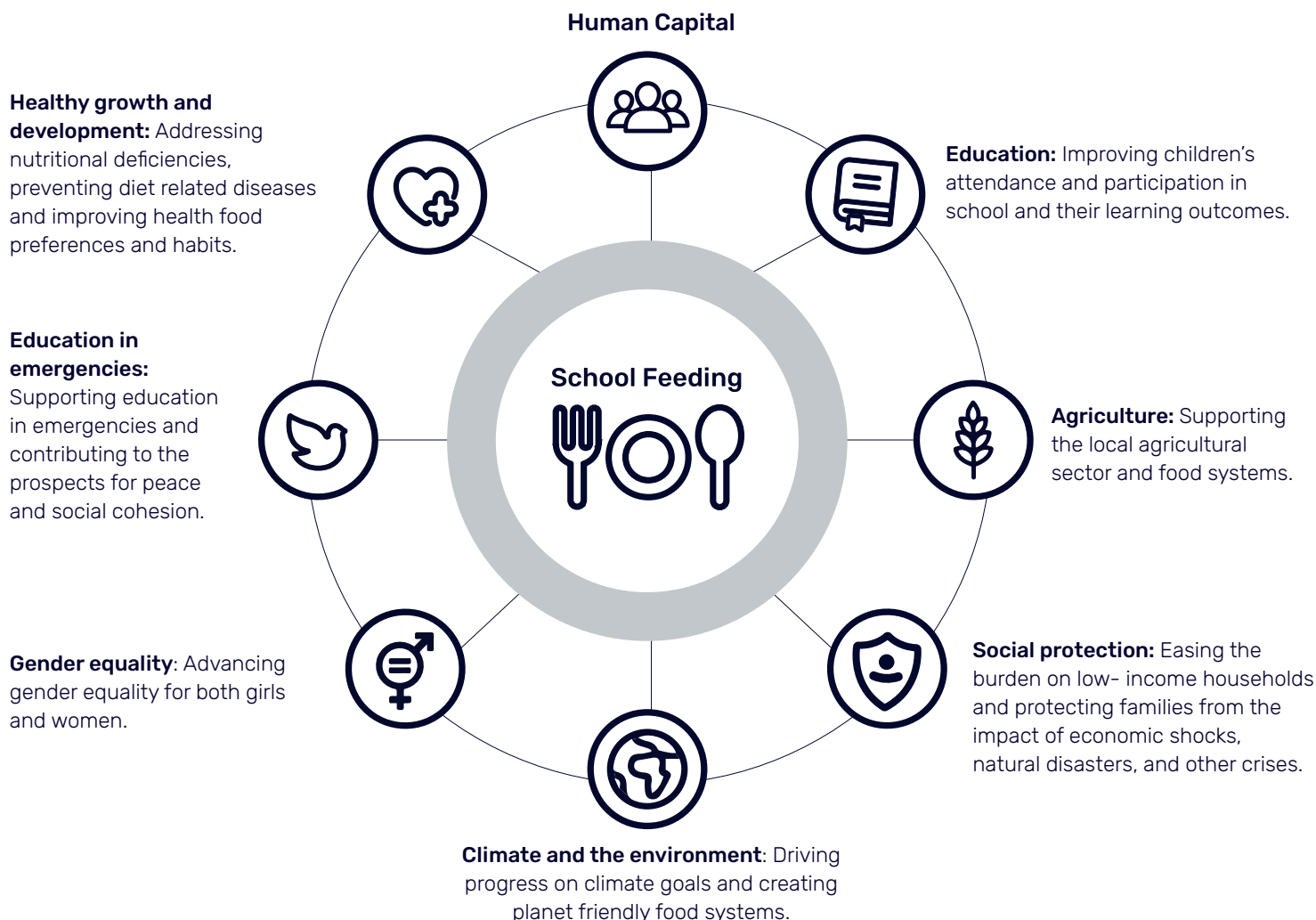
Cost-effective

School feeding is the costliest element of the integrated package but is “cost-effective” because of the multiple large returns and benefits it can achieve. Properly designed school meal programmes that improve the well-being and education of school-age children and adolescents can offer returns of between \$7 and \$35 for each \$1 invested.²⁰

Multi-sector impact

This return on investment is so large because the benefits from school meals accrue to multiple sectors, including to agriculture through investments in the rural economy and job creation; to education through improved attendance and learning; to health and nutrition through the provision of nutritious foods that foster healthy growth; and to social protection by serving as an in-kind cash transfer and promoting social stability.²² Additionally, national programs benefit from economies of scale. Programs that procure from smallholder farmers can see particularly high returns, with some analyses suggesting returns of \$20 for every \$1 invested because of the additional benefits that accrue to the local food system and economy.²³

This toolkit sets out the return on investment that school meals can make to seven priority areas:





2.3 Human capital

Human capital: The sum of a population's health, skills, knowledge, and experience - is a central driver of development. A quality education, combined with a guaranteed package of health and nutrition interventions at school, such as school meals, makes an important contribution to children and young people's development. Creating a healthier and more skilled population builds human capital, creating greater equity and economic growth.

Human capital consists of the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential.

Human capital drives growth

Human capital is a central driver of sustainable growth and poverty reduction. More human capital is associated with higher earnings for people, higher income for countries, and stronger cohesion in societies. Yet, the World Bank's Human Capital Index shows that nearly 60% of children born today will be, at best, only half as productive as they could be with complete education and full health.²⁴

A vital investment

Investments in human capital are important for high- and low-income countries alike. In high-income settings with aging populations, the median age is around 40 years (e.g. countries in Europe and North America) and school-age children and adolescents represent less than 10% of the total population. It is this smaller segment of the population that will be relied upon to sustain the national economy for all. Conversely, in low-income countries with young populations, the median age can be as low as 15 to 16 years (e.g. countries across West Africa). Yet without targeted human capital interventions, this population cannot meaningfully increase the economic growth of their nation.²⁵

Schools build human capital

Supporting school-age children and adolescents – spanning ages five to 19 years – to acquire knowledge and skills through schooling, and to grow and develop physically and to stay healthy is a principal way of developing human capital. The school system represents a cost-effective platform through which to build the human capital of a country, both with quality teaching that leads to the acquisition of important skills as well as supporting the health and development of children through interventions such as school meals.



Investing in people through quality education is key to building human capital.

The first 8,000 days

The first 1,000 days of life – from a child’s conception until their second birthday – is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations for optimum health and development across the lifespan are established. Recognition of the vital importance of this developmental phase has led to the design and delivery of a comprehensive package of services for mothers, babies, families and caregivers.

Investment in these services during the first 1,000 days is widely recognized as a high priority, but there is a growing recognition of the importance of continued investment to support the healthy development of children in the next 7,000 days of childhood and adolescence. Throughout this period, there are three principal and highly sensitive phases that, just like early childhood, require age-appropriate and condition-specific support if a child is to achieve their full potential as an adult.

Middle childhood growth and consolidation phase (ages 5–9)

Infection and malnutrition remain key constraints on development, and mortality rates are higher than previously realised.

Adolescent growth spurt (ages 10–14)

This phase brings with it a major increase in body mass, and significant physiological and behavioural changes associated with puberty.

Adolescent growth and consolidation phase (ages 15 to early 20s)

During this phase, further brain restructuring takes place, linked with exploration and experimentation, and initiation of behaviours that are life-long determinants of health.²⁶

Broadening investment in human development to include scalable interventions during these critical stages of child and adolescent development, in addition to the first 1,000 days, is of urgent importance. Nutritious and routinely provided school meals can complement the essential earlier interventions during the first 1000 days by supporting the learner and their learning in the following three ways:

- Securing the gains of the earlier interventions;
- Supporting opportunities for catch-up growth during the next 7000 days;
- Ensuring the well-being of young people during crucial developmental phases during the next 7000 days, including puberty and the rewiring of the brain in late adolescence.²⁷



2.3.1 Education

Many children still do not have access to education, and for many who do they are not learning the basics. It is estimated that 70% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple text.²⁸

School meals make it easier for children to attend school every day, remain for the entire school day, concentrate while in school, participate and learn. These benefits are particularly high for children from vulnerable groups and families and for girls.²⁹



More children have access to education but attending school and learning are made difficult by illness, hunger and malnutrition.

One of the significant achievements of the Millennium Development Goal era was to get more children in school than ever before.³⁰ Yet despite this achievement serious challenges exist. Enrolling in school, attending regularly, learning at school and making the transition to higher grades are often made more difficult by illness, hunger and malnutrition.

Additionally, in many places, the quality of education remains low and as a result children are in school but are not acquiring basic skills, like literacy and numeracy.

School meals bring children to school and keep them there

School meal programmes provide an incentive for parents to send their children to school by reducing parents' opportunity cost of sending their child to school with school meals serving as a condition non-cash transfer. Research has found it can increase enrolment rates by 9% and attendance by 8%.³¹

School meals support learning

Once children are in school, school meals can also boost learning. The Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) is a metric introduced by the World Bank that measures both the quantity and quality of education.

The current evidence suggests that the scale of improvement in learning from school meals and school health is of a similar order of magnitude to interventions which we already know to be effective, such as those promoting early child development, better qualified teachers and better classroom practices.³²

The educational benefits of school meal programmes in terms of attendance, and learning outcomes are particularly significant for girls and vulnerable groups.³³



2.3.2 Healthy growth and development

High-quality school meals can deliver immediate, lifelong and intergenerational benefits for individuals, including by addressing nutritional deficiencies, by reducing determinants for diet-related non-communicable diseases, and establishing a lifelong preference for healthy food habits and diets.

School meals can help build on the investments that governments are making in the first 1,000 days of a child's life at the same time as providing a new window to address growth deficits from early childhood. School meals can support weight and height gain, as evidenced by a systematic review that analysed three randomised control trials in Jamaica, Kenya, and China.³⁴⁻³⁷ Additionally, cumulative exposure to health promoting interventions, such as daily school meals, during adolescence have been associated with improvements in future child linear growth, as was seen in India following decades of providing its Mid-Day Meals Programme.³⁸



Case study: India's mid-day meal scheme provides benefits across the generations

India's mid-day meal scheme is the world's largest school meal programme, feeding 120 million children daily. The national programme utilises a decentralised delivery model, which empowers local communities and ensures that meals adhere to cultural preferences. 2.5 million jobs have been created by the programme, largely in local communities, a high proportion of which are women.

A 2021 evaluation of the programme identified significant health and education cross-generational gains, transmitted through the increased agency of women: the children of mothers who had received meals under the programme were less likely to be stunted, used health facilities to a greater extent, had higher school retention rates and married later.³⁹

Impact of malnutrition

The triple burden of malnutrition can restrict healthy physical and cognitive development and increase the risk of developing diet-related non-communicable diseases.

High-quality school meals can improve the macronutrient and micronutrient adequacy in children's diet.⁴⁰ As an example, school meal programmes in Uganda reduced anaemia deficiency in girls by 20%.⁴¹

Enhancing nutritional content

School meal programmes can increase the nutritional content of school meals by using ingredients fortified with vitamins and/or minerals, which, according to the Global Survey of School Meals, 68% of global programmes do.⁴² Guidance is available to support countries with developing or strengthening nutrient-based standards for national school meals programs,⁴³ and freely available menu planning tools (discussed in Part 1.5) can help optimize the design of school menus.

Improving long-term health

Dietary preferences and social attitudes around food are established during childhood and carried into adulthood, making school meal programmes an exceptional opportunity to address the determinants of obesity in the long-term. High-quality school meal programmes are associated with increased intake of healthy foods, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵



School meals build on investments in the first 1,000 days of a child's life and support healthy development in the next 7,000 days of childhood and adolescence.



2.4 An effective social safety net

By providing vital nutrition and protecting their access to education, school meals provide an effective social safety net to the most vulnerable children and their families. School meals also increase the disposable income available to families, which is essential for households experiencing crises of poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity.

Economic downturns, food insecurity, conflicts and climate extremes all threaten the livelihoods and wellbeing of households globally, disproportionately affecting low-income families and their children. At the same time, year-on-year increases in food prices reached record levels in recent years. Soaring food inflation is most challenging for low-income households as they spend a high proportion of their income on food.⁴⁶

In 2020 almost 3.1 billion people could not afford a healthy diet.⁴⁷



School meals increase the income available to families.

Easing the pressures on households

Given the multiple challenges facing households there is an urgent need to support families, and school meals are one effective and scalable method for doing so. Recent survey data from 125 countries suggests that 85 percent of low-income countries identify safety nets as a policy objective for school meals. This suggests that school meals carry more weight as a social development strategy in poorer countries where the needs are more complex and resources are scarcer than in more developed countries that have a richer mix of policy tools.⁴⁸ Feeding children at school eases the pressure on household budgets: research from four low-and-middle income countries shows that the value of a school meal represented between 8-to-16% of the income of the poorest households.⁴⁹ Households get even more benefits when they have more children going to schools and receiving school meals.

The value of school meals for one child represents between 8% to 16% of household income in low income settings.⁵⁰



2.5 Supporting local agriculture and food systems

School meal programmes can be designed to deliver extensive benefits to local food systems and the local economy, by supporting the livelihoods of farmers and others in food value chains, improving food security and providing local employment.

Challenges for smallholder farmers

In many developing countries, smallholder farmers, most of which are women, are constrained by insufficient access to finance, limited education and lack of access to markets, agricultural inputs, and technology.⁵¹ At the same time, climate extremes pose a serious threat to their livelihoods.

Supporting smallholder farmers is essential, as they produce around 35% of the world's food⁵² and are key to sustainable long-term development.



Smallholder farmers produce more than a third of the world's food.

Home-grown school feeding programmes

Home-grown school feeding programmes can help address some of these challenges, by specifically sourcing the food provided at school from local smallholder farmers, ideally through farmer organisations that are able to aggregate farmers and collect food to ensure food safety and quality, and to participate in public tendering.

Schools can provide these farmers and their organisations with a predictable market for their produce, and longer-term contracts can contribute to creating stable, increased income, greater ability to invest into higher productivity, quality of food, and resilience – and can facilitate access to affordable credit.

Additionally, local food security can be improved, if a school meal programme uses – and locally buys – food which addresses local nutrient deficiencies, is adapted to local climate and conditions, and is culturally appropriate.

One approach to enhance biodiversity and diet diversification in school meals is to integrate a home-grown school feeding model into the school food value chain.

This model provides smallholder farmers and their organisations with increased opportunities to participate in public tendering, improved access to markets and stable income-generating opportunities.

This is the reason why the agricultural sector leads school meals programs in some countries; for example, the US federal school meals program emerged in the 1930s recession as a market stimulus for smallholder farmers and the program continues to be led by the US Department of Agriculture today.⁵³

At least 46 countries have implemented Home-Grown School Feeding Strategies and the African Union has adopted it as a preferred strategy for pursuing educational and agricultural objectives.

Boosting local economies

Local community involvement in school meal programmes can help ensure sustainability of the programmes and provide direct benefits to the local economy, in particular through increased employment. Many jobs are related to the preparation of food, benefitting local cooks and small catering companies, the majority of which are led by women.

School meal programmes have created approximately 4 million direct jobs in 85 countries.⁵⁵ This equates to 1,000 – 2,000 jobs for every 100,000 children fed.⁵⁶

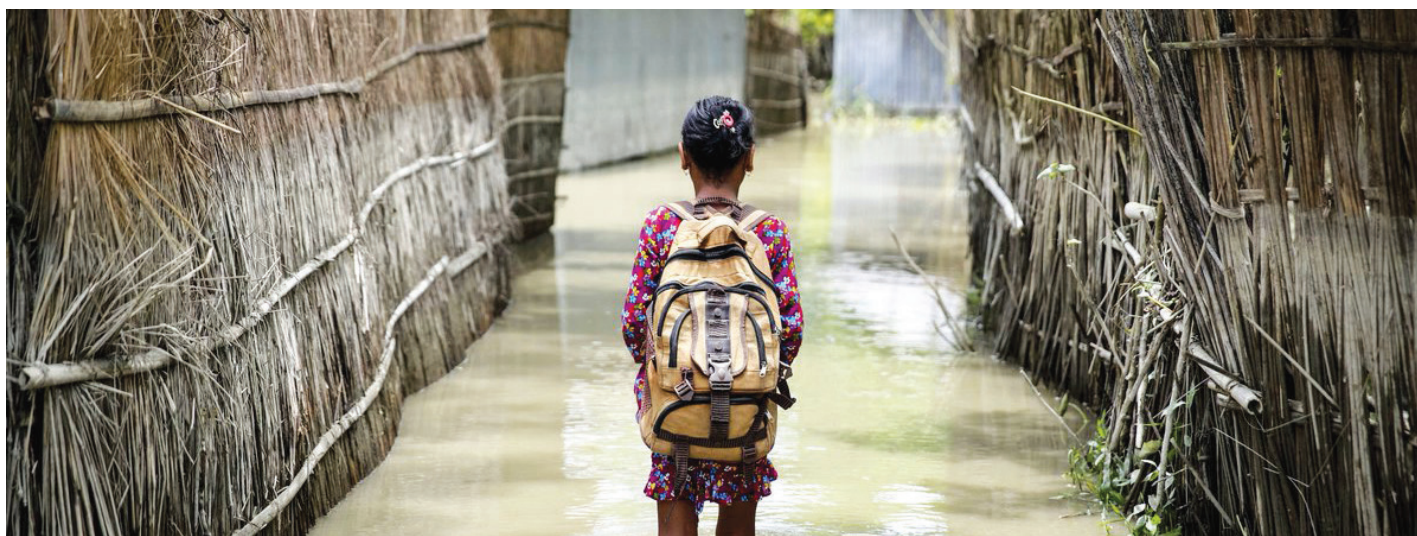


Procuring food for school meals from smallholder farmers – most of whom are women – can boost the economy, food security and household incomes.



2.6 Climate and the Environment

School meal programmes can be designed and implemented in a planet-friendly manner, significantly reducing the emissions and environmental impact of the programme and helping to develop sustainable food systems and diets.



Cyclones, typhoons, floods and droughts are increasing in severity and intensity disrupting the education of millions of children around the world.

Climate changes poses serious challenges for education and food security

The climate crisis and young people's education are inextricably linked. A warming world increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, which impacts the education of 40 million children annually, mostly in low and lower middle-income countries.⁵⁷ Education facilities can be physically damaged by weather extremes like flooding, drought or powerful storms. But these events can also leave families with little option but to rely on children to look after animals, or to travel long distances to collect water. Switching resources from learning to survival in this way often affects vulnerable communities the most.

Children that remain in school can still suffer from the indirect impacts of environmental changes, with rising temperatures affecting physical well-being and making learning more of a challenge. Climate change also poses significant challenges to global food security. Long-term changes in temperature, humidity, rainfall patterns and the frequency of extreme weather events are already affecting farming practices, crop production and the nutritional quality of food crops.

Food production is a significant source of gas emissions

21% – 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions stem from food systems,⁵⁸ originating from the types of food consumed, industrial farming, carbon-intensive agricultural practices, traditional cooking methods and extensive global supply chains. School meals represent 70% of all publicly managed food systems.⁵⁹ Because of their reach and scale, governments can, through policy change, have immediate and direct effects on food related emissions.

School menus can be adapted to reduce their carbon footprint, by ensuring nutrient rich context-specific diverse menus and if possible reducing the levels of animal source protein. School meal programmes can also be used to ensure cleaner cooking practices are used and learnt. Using clean cooking methods can make it easier to move to modern energy cooking technologies, including clean fuels and efficient stoves. A switch from open fires to electric cookers can significantly reduce pollution. Meanwhile switching to renewable energy will reduce the carbon emissions associated with food preparation.⁶⁰



School gardens, like this one in Guatemala, can be used to teach planet-friendly food growing practices.

Planet-friendly school meals

Planet friendly school meals can reduce emissions and promote more sustainable food systems through:

- A shift to nutrient-rich, diverse menus, which are climate resilient, culturally relevant, and sustainable.
- Clean efficient cooking methods powered by renewable energy.
- Reducing food and package waste.
- Empowering school children to become agents of change through nutrition education.

In the long-term, changes to school meal programmes can encourage policy changes that support sustainable farming, driving a shift towards more planet-friendly agricultural and procurement practices in the future.

These include:

- Sourcing ingredients from sustainable agriculture.
- Introducing environmental targets in procurement rules.
- Capacity building for small businesses and farmers to implement planet-friendly practices throughout their supply chains.
- Linking farmers' organisations to planet-friendly technologies, practices, services, and products.

Education also provides opportunities to include planet-friendly practices in the curriculum and training for those involved in the design of menus and purchase of food.

School gardens, where children can learn basic agricultural skills and improve their understanding of nutrition can be used to teach planet-friendly practices related to agriculture, cooking and eating.⁶¹⁻⁶²

Providing meals in line with recommendations for healthy and sustainable dietary patterns could reduce environmental impacts on average by 26% for flexitarian meals, 43% for vegetarian meals, and 52% for vegan meals.⁶³



2.7 Supporting education in emergencies, building peace and social cohesion

School meals can play a vital role in emergency and crisis contexts, providing life-enhancing safety nets that supply children with nutrition and support their education. School meal programmes can contribute to reducing conflicts by increasing trust in institutions through effective and equitable public service delivery, by creating a sense of normalcy, and by promoting a peaceful community of children sharing daily meals with each other.



School meals support food security and education in emergencies

In emergency and crisis contexts, school meals interventions represent safety nets that provide children with essential nutrition and support their education.

During crises and emergencies, when food insecurity tends to be higher, school meals act as an important incentive for parents to send their children to school. They can help to combat acute food insecurity, provide children with a sense of normalcy, and create more conducive conditions to learn, and therefore boosting educational outcomes.

Low- and middle-income countries have responded to previous crises, including conflicts in Chad, DRC, Niger, Syria, Yemen, and Sudan, by expanding school meal programmes, because they reach into the heart of poor communities and benefit children directly. High-income countries have also made use of school meals as a safety net during critical periods, including in response to the 2009 Food, Fuel, and Financial Crisis.⁶⁸

The year 2023 saw the highest number of violent conflicts since the second world war.⁶⁴ As a result 450 million children, 1 in 6 globally, are living in conflict zones.⁶⁵ Girls and vulnerable groups are likely to face greater adversity; in countries affected by conflict, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.⁶⁷

Despite the devastating impact of the war in Ukraine on education the government is committed to expanding the country's school meal programme.

222 million crisis-affected children are in essential need of educational assistance.

78.2 million of them are out of school.

120 million are attending school, but not acquiring minimum proficiency in reading or maths.⁶⁶

School meals may help reduce conflict

Weak service delivery and failures of governance have been widely recognized as underlying causes of conflict.⁶⁹

School meals may help overcome this challenge through reliable and equitable service delivery. Successful engagement between local authorities, formal institutions and communities can positively contribute to increasing trust between the population and the Government on a local and district level.

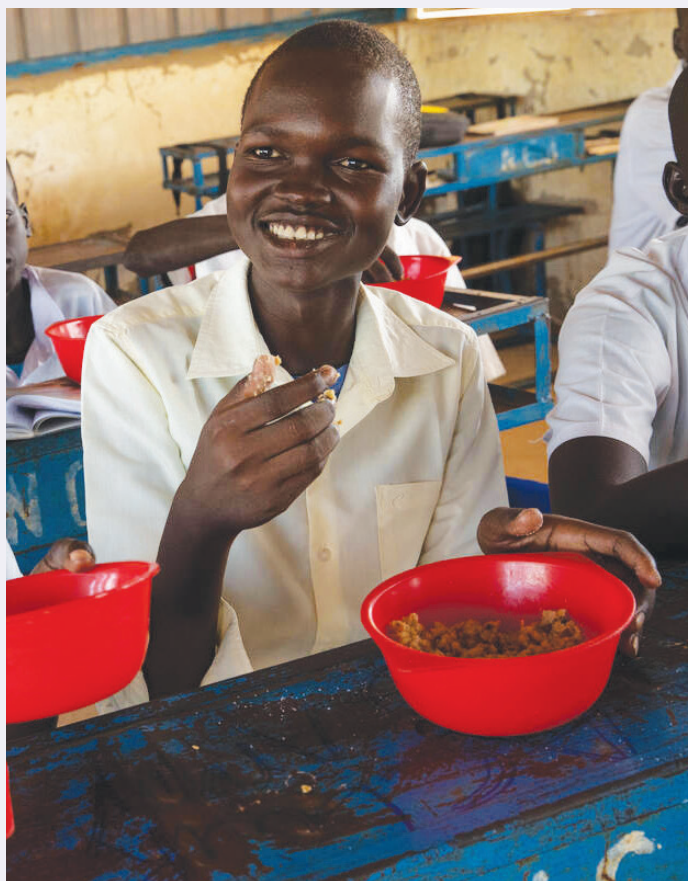
In addition, in contexts where failure to provide education to specific identity groups is a significant driver of conflict, deliberately and visibly targeting disadvantaged groups could potentially help remedy the sense of injustice. During periods of fragility, when food insecurity tends to be higher, school meals act as an important incentive for parents to send their children to school. Evidence from Mali suggests that school meals can reduce the participation of school-age girls in the labour market by 10 percentage points compared to general food assistance.⁷⁰



Case study: School meals drive enrollment and participation in education in conflict-affected South Sudan

The World Food Programme in South Sudan has provided meals to over 500,000 children in the country's conflict-affected regions. When introduced, school enrolment and attendance increased by nearly 80%.⁷¹

Mary's Meals are also active, reaching over 75,000 children, with attention to long-term peace striving for more educated, healthier children with strengthened trust in institutions produces.⁷²





2.8 Advancing gender equality

School meal programmes can help to advance gender equality by supporting girls' education, health and employment. Research finds that the benefits of school meal programmes are often greater for girls, because they help overcome aspects of the existing disadvantage and discrimination they face.

Globally, women and girls face systemic disadvantages, due to poverty, unequal power relations, and discriminatory social and gender norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices, such as early, forced and child marriage, early pregnancy and other forms of gender-based violence.

129 million girls globally are out of school.⁷³

School meals support girls' education, health and employment

School meals are likely to boost girls' education, including increased enrolment, participation and learning outcomes, which, in turn, can reduce the likelihood of early marriage and early pregnancy.⁷⁵

By reducing the opportunity cost of them participating in school, school meals make girls' attendance possible and encourage families and communities to support it. For example, data from school meal programmes across 32 sub-Saharan countries showed in-school meals combined with take-home rations increased the enrolment of girls by 12%.⁷⁶

School meals also fight the nutritional challenges girls face, as programmes can ensure girls receive adequate and gender-sensitive nutrition. For example, women and girls are, for physiological reasons, more likely to experience higher rates of anaemia, than are men and boys: it is estimated that globally almost one in five adolescents has anaemia.⁷⁷ School meal programmes have demonstrated effects on reducing anaemia in girls by 20%.⁷⁸

Moreover, school meals support women's employment and empowerment. School meal programmes have created 4 million jobs globally, with the majority related to food preparation, benefitting local cooks and small catering companies, most of them led by women.⁷⁹

The introduction of clean cooking solutions substantially improves working conditions also making these jobs healthier, reducing inhalation of harmful smoke.

By benefitting smallholder farmers, most of which are women, local food procurement is also targeting the economic and social development of women. Additionally, the programmes are often overseen by school meals management committees, with strong participation of women, giving them responsibilities within the local community.

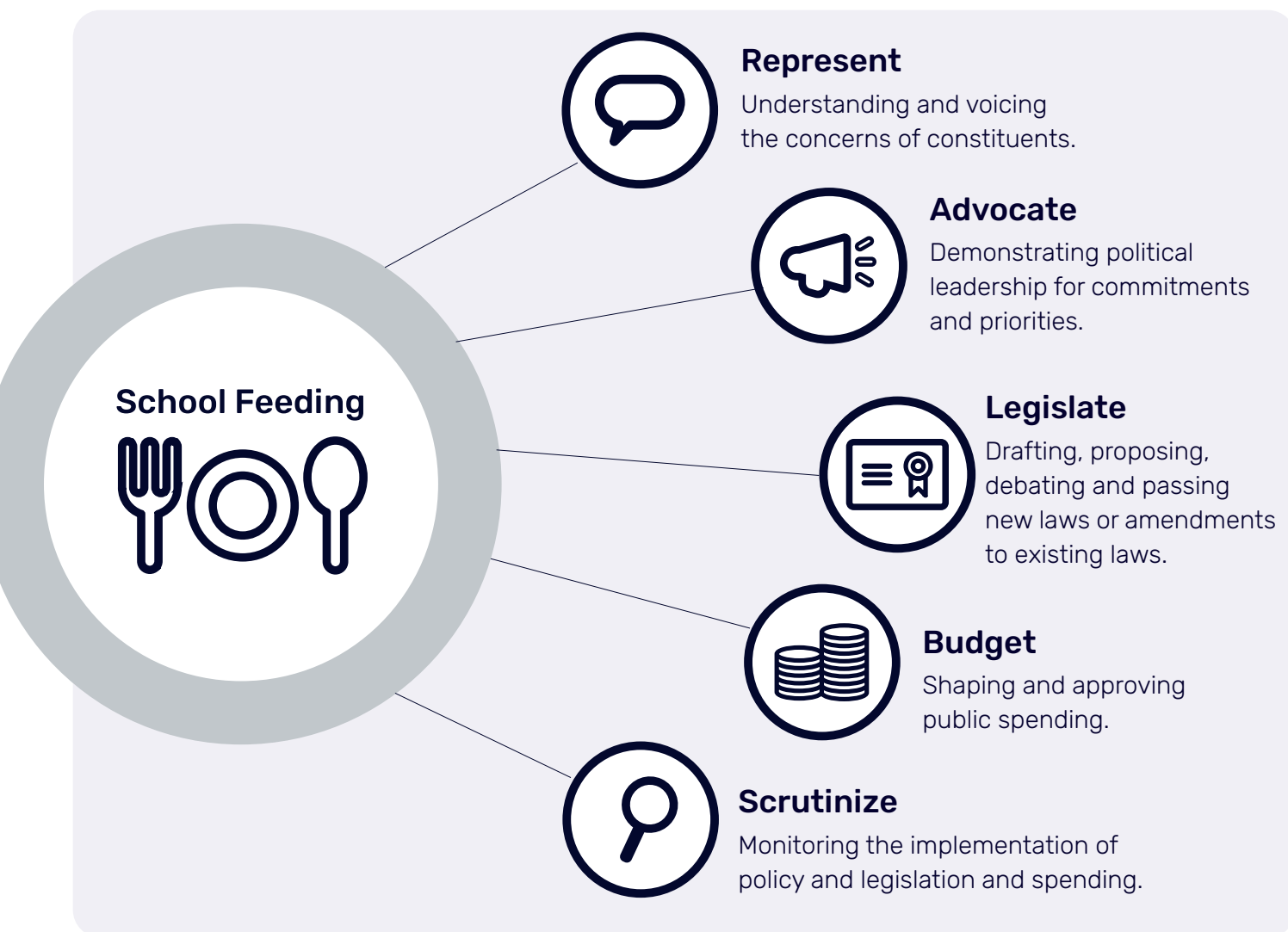
150 million more women than men were food insecure in 2021.⁷⁴



School meals help tackle the specific nutritional challenges girls face.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

This section of the toolkit explains how parliamentarians can support the expansion and improvement of school meals through their powers to represent their communities, act as advocates, make and pass laws, and shape and approve national budgets, as well as provide oversight of government policy and action.



(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals



The UN General Assembly recognised the essential role of national parliaments to achieve the SDGs through their powers to legislate, budget and scrutinize government action.

Parliamentarians key to sustainable development

In a historic first, the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled Enhancing the role of parliaments in accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁸⁰

The resolution recognizes the essential role of national parliaments to bring the SDGs and interventions which contribute to them, such as school meals, to life through their unique roles and responsibilities. Parliamentarians have already recognized and taken on responsibilities for delivering the aims which underpin school meals, especially in the area of improved nutrition. On 18 November 2014, at “Parliaments for Better Nutrition”, the pre-conference meeting of parliamentarians attending the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2), participants issued a joint statement recognizing parliaments “as institutions capable of addressing the problem of malnutrition within their constitutional mandates”.⁸¹

Parliamentary action against hunger

More recently, at the First Global Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition held in Madrid in October 2018, a call was made to all parliamentarians to establish policies, prepare legislation, assign specific budgets and forge alliances and agreements aimed at achieving the objectives of the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2) – end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.⁸²

Much of the subsequent focus, including of a series of regional parliamentary declarations,⁸³ focussed on maternal and child nutrition.

Growing recognition of importance of nutrition for older children and adolescents as described earlier in the toolkit provides an important opportunity to build parliamentary knowledge, understanding and commitment in support of school meals in a similar way both within parliaments, between parliaments collaborating within their regions, and globally.



3.1 Representation

For effective representation, parliamentarians need to stay engaged with their constituents to know their needs and to advocate for their interests.

Members of parliament should speak to their constituents about school meals. This might involve asking them about the delivery of school meal programmes if they exist, asking whether the programme is in fact being delivered as intended, whether the food provided is acceptable to children and of sufficient quality. If school meals aren't being provided, asking communities whether they would be a priority and if so, how they could be designed and delivered.

Parliamentarians could also assess the satisfaction with existing programmes by speaking to stakeholders in the school food chain, from small holder farmers and representatives of farmer organisations, to

caterers, to teachers and school leaders and of course students and parents. Support for the programme and suggestions about how it could be improved can be shared in parliament, with the government, including in parliamentary sessions with the responsible Minister and in specific parliamentary committees.

Members of parliament can also seek the views of civil society, international and research organisations working on or interested in school meals both in their country and internationally. Members can ask these organisations for disaggregated evidence, data and analysis to assess the current situation in respect of school meals to ensure that they have been designed and are being implemented as effectively as possible. In almost every country there will be one or more organisations working on children's education and development.



Talking to students, teachers and parents about school meals enables members of parliament to represent their concerns to government.

Representation checklist

- Speak to constituents about the value of school meal programmes, how they could be designed and delivered if they don't already exist and how they could be expanded and improved if they do.
- Solicit disaggregated evidence, data and analysis from research networks and other relevant stakeholders to assess the current state of child and adolescent nutrition which can be used to frame the child health and development challenges that school meals can help solve.
- Share the interest in and support for school meals from external stakeholders, including groups from your constituency, in parliament and with the government, including the responsible minister.

Case study: MPs amplify the voice of diverse supporters of school meals

Free school meals enjoy widespread support in the United Kingdom. Recent polling shows 72% of UK adults would like the Government to make school meals free for all primary age children.⁸⁶ Over 300 civic organisations including trade unions, charities, faith leaders, medical bodies and educators, along with tens of thousands of parents, carers and community members have signed up to support the Free School Meals for All campaign, which is being led by the United Kingdom's National Education Union. The campaign has brought the issue to members of the UK Parliament securing strong cross-party parliamentary support.⁸⁷



Young people bring campaign for school meals to parliament

Bite Back is a youth-led movement working to achieve a world where all young people have the opportunity to be healthy, no matter where they live. The campaign secured a u-turn on the UK Government's decision to not provide free school meal vouchers during the school holidays during the COVID 19 lockdown when schools were closed.⁸⁴ The campaign's petition secured nearly 500,000 signatures and the issue was debated in parliament.⁸⁵ The campaign is now working to expand access and improve the quality of free school meals regularly bringing young people to make the case for universal free school meals to MPs. Bringing stakeholders to parliament that support school meals or creating a coalition like Free School Meals for All can help demonstrate the extent of support for the creation and expansion of school meal programmes.



3.2 Advocacy

School meal programmes need advocates - individuals who are prepared to make the case for school meals, urging decision makers such as ministers and/or officials to expand and/or improve school meals.

Members of parliament have a unique role to play as advocates, leveraging their role as representatives with direct access to constituents with their unique powers to make and reform laws and shape the use of public funding.

Parliamentarians can also act as advocates when they perform their oversight function, assessing whether and to what extent the government is implementing its own policies and laws and spending public finances effectively.

Advocacy can amplify both the support for school meals among constituents as well as make the case for school meals drawing on the latest evidence, some of which was shared in part 1 of this toolkit.



Members of parliament have a unique role to play as advocates, combining their representative role with their power to make and reform laws and shape the use of public funding.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

There are four mutually supportive ways in which members of parliament can advocate for school meals.

1. Champion school meals

Parliamentarians armed with evidence of the benefits of school meals and who understand the extent of stakeholder support for them are powerful change agents. They can speak up for school meals in parliament helping their colleagues understand the issue, raise the issue with ministers and officials and grow greater political understanding of and support for school meals. Members of parliament can also advocate for school meals publicly both in the media and using their social media channels.

2. Mobilise other members of parliament in advocating for school meals

The chances of achieving change increases when an issue has wide support. This is why collective action and advocacy by parliamentarians working together can help accelerate the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes. School meal programmes around the world have been initiated and/or supported by governments from across the political spectrum.

Where possible cross party alliances for school meals can be built, drawing support from members of parliament from different political parties. In many countries, parliamentarians from across their national political spectrum have gathered in formal or informal networks (often referred as alliances or caucuses) to advocate, mobilise and advance food security and nutrition issues.⁸⁸

Case study: European parliamentarians fighting hunger together

Constituted in April 2016, the European Parliamentary Alliance against Hunger and Malnutrition brings together Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from different nationalities, political groups and parliamentary committees.

Through the Alliance, MEPs are working to strengthen the political commitment to fight against hunger and malnutrition at the European Union level. The Alliance provides a platform for policy dialogue and awareness raising on the right to adequate food for all, on the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition and on making agriculture more sustainable and resilient.⁸⁹



The European Parliamentary Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition bring together MEPs from different countries, political groups and committees.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Collaboration can also be sought with stakeholders outside of parliament, building broad alliances that support sustained political commitment to school meals that are not just cross party but multi-sectoral.

As we saw in part 1 of this toolkit, school meals help solve several issues and benefit multiple sectors. This means that advocacy doesn't have to be confined to discussions about education or nutrition.

Case study: Harnessing the power of parents

Parents can be powerful allies in expanding and improving school meals.

In Zimbabwe, Camfed Mothers Groups are working to ensure over 3000 orphans and vulnerable children remain in school and are advocating for the use of school meals as an incentive, as they help make attendance possible and worthwhile.⁹⁰

Parents are also often involved in the delivery of school meal programmes such as in the Mexico City School Breakfast Programme which relies on the help of 26,000 parents.⁹¹ Their participation helps ensure that food is consumed at the beginning of the school day and contributes to monitoring the proper washing of fruits and hands.



Parents have played a central part in ensuring the delivery and improving the quality of Mexico City's School Breakfast Programme.

3. Work with members from other parliaments in your region

The practice of parliamentarians coming together across their regions to learn, share ideas, and agree on joint solutions to shared challenges is well established. This happens formally via meetings of permanent regional parliamentary institutions but also when members of parliament come together to discuss an issue of particular interest. The work of permanent regional parliamentary institutions is shaped by their respective member parliaments. Parliamentarians can help put school meals on the agenda of these bodies, which in turn can help build regional support for the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes.

Case study: Parliamentarians working together in their regions

Established in 2009, the Parliamentary Front against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean (PFH LAC) is a multi-party platform that brings together legislators from Parliaments in the LAC region, principally aimed at strengthening the legislative and institutional frameworks to facilitate the effective realisation of the right to adequate food.

Since the establishment of the PFH LAC, four framework laws have been developed as guides to countries and more than thirty laws relating to food and nutrition security, including school meals have been enacted nationally.⁹² More recently, five more parliamentary alliances related to food security have been established at sub regional level around the world. This includes the Eastern Africa Parliamentary Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition (EAPA FSN), the Parliamentary Network for Food Security in Africa and the Arab World, the ECOWAS Parliamentary Network for gender equality and investment in agriculture for food security, the Central Africa Parliamentary Alliance (RAPAC-SAN), and the trans-regional parliamentary alliance, the Afro-Latin American Parliamentary Forum. (AFROLAC).



Since its establishment the Latin American and Caribbean Parliamentary Front Against Hunger has helped to develop thirty laws relating to food and nutrition including several national school meal laws.

4. Work with members of parliament from around the world

There are a variety of ways in which parliamentarians come together internationally to advance issues. In doing so they build understanding of and commitment to act on issues of mutual concern and support parliamentary development – improvements in the work of parliaments themselves – with the aim of addressing these issues more effectively. This can be done via the work of international inter-parliamentary organisations operating internationally such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union – the global organisation of national parliaments – as well as groups such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association or the Francophone Parliamentary Assembly.

Case study: Commonwealth parliamentarians back school meals

The International Parliamentary Network for Education (IPNEd) gave over 700 members of parliament from 180 Commonwealth legislatures the opportunity to demonstrate their support for school meals at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s 66th Conference in Ghana.

Prior to the conference Tanzanian MP and IPNEd’s representative for Africa, Neema Lugangira issued a call for a Commonwealth commitment to school meals.

“There is urgent work to be done in other Commonwealth member states where school feeding programmes could make a vital contribution to tackle the triple crisis of less learning, more poverty and worsening nutrition,” said Ms Lugangira.

MPs attending the conference responded enthusiastically committing to create, expand and improve school meal programmes on returning to their parliaments.⁹³



Members of Nigeria’s sub-national legislatures show their support for school meals at the 66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Ghana.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Members from participating parliaments shape the work and priorities of these organisations. This presents parliamentarians with an important opportunity to advocate for school meals in these forums. Parliamentarians also have an important role as advocates at global meetings, bringing the perspective of parliaments to these fora, encouraging their governments to make ambitious pledges when making commitments at international meetings and holding their government to account for the delivery of commitments they have made.



Tanzanian MP Neema Lugangira and Ghanaian MP Peter Nortsu-Kotoe speaking at the Global School Meals Coalition Summit.

Case study: MPs participate in the first global School Meals Coalition Summit

The ranking member of the Ghana Parliament's Education Committee, Hon Peter Nortsu-Kotoe a champion of school meals attended the first global School Meals Coalition Summit which took place in Paris France in October 2023.

Mr. Nortsu-Kotoe joined a panel discussion where he explained the important role that parliamentarians can play in ensuring commitments made by governments are implemented. "Confronted by competing priorities and a constrained fiscal environment, MPs can help governments to deliver their commitments by using the legislative, budgetary and oversight tools available to parliament, encouraging governments to do better and go faster," said Mr Nortsu-Kotoe.⁹⁴

Case study: Global Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition

The Global Parliamentary Summit against Hunger and Malnutrition sought to advance political will, as expressed by parliaments, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) at international level. Around two hundred parliamentarians from different countries all over the world joined the Summit in Madrid in October 2018 and affirmed their political commitments on Zero Hunger and malnutrition.

Over the two days of the meeting, a call was made to all parliamentarians to establish policies, enact legislation, assign specific budgets and forge alliances and agreements; The Summit Declaration, adopted by general consensus and acclamation, reaffirms the key role and engagement of Parliamentarians as custodians of political commitments to foster the necessary political will to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030.⁹⁵



Members of parliament have a key role to play in achieving Zero Hunger by 2030.

Suggestions for parliamentary advocacy for school meals

Members of parliament can advocate for school meals using parliamentary processes in a number of ways.

Motions

Most parliaments allow members to move motions which call the attention of the parliament to a particular issue and urge action by the government. Moving a motion on school meals in parliament is a good way to bring attention to the issue and build support for it by asking other members to support the motion.

Questions

Ask ministers oral or written questions either about whether they are aware of the contribution that school meals can play to addressing a specific policy challenge or about the implementation of existing policies and laws in respect of school meals. You can also ask the government to join the School Meals Coalition or if it is already a member how it is participating in the Coalition.

During legislative debates

During a debate on a proposal to reform an existing law or create a new one, if it's relevant the case for school meals can be raised.

During committee deliberations

Parliamentary committees give members of parliament the opportunity to gather inputs from a variety of sources and discuss issues in depth. Committees often have a role in examining: proposals for new laws or reforms to existing laws; the case for spending public finances on something or how effectively it is already being spent; the delivery of public services; or to review an issue of concern. Raising school meals or the issues which school meals can help address during the work done by a parliamentary committee can be an effective way of advocating for school meals.

Advocacy checklist

- Learn about the multisectoral benefits of school meals so that you can be an informed advocate.
- Identify the stakeholders in your constituency, nationally and internationally who have an interest in school meals and who you can work with to create coalitions for change.
- Advocate for school meals in the media and using your social media and other communication channels.
- Identify and work with other members of your parliament, parliaments in your region and parliamentarians internationally to advocate for school meals.
- Use the opportunities your parliament provides such as motions, questions, debates and committee initiatives to share the benefits of school meals and to urge action in support of a school meal programme in your context.



3.3 Legislation

Parliaments play a key role in the implementation and delivery of public services by making or reforming laws that govern those services. While a national school meal programme can be implemented without being based on a law, such a legal basis would significantly increase its chances of long-term sustainability and success. It translates political commitment for school meals into action mandated, financed and overseen by parliament.

A school meal programme that is grounded in law:

- has the assurance of longer term continuity, by establishing a commitment beyond an individual government;
- has a competent authority and assigned institutions with responsibilities clearly defined by law;
- commits public resources and institutions to support the delivery of the programme;
- creates clear opportunities for parliament to oversee the implementation of the programme;
- provides the basis for public knowledge of the programme.



Case study: Cabo Verde: From policy to legislation

In 1979 with the support of the World Food Programme the small island developing state of Cabo Verde, off the west African coast, launched a national school meal programme. After more than 30 years of implementation and 100 percent of primary schools covered, Cabo Verde's Ministries of Education, Health and Agriculture, took over funding and management of the programme. In 2015 a school meals law was enacted, which proved key to securing full and effective national ownership of the programme.

The programme has enhanced nutrition, health and hygiene education for children, their families and the surrounding communities, and the school staff including teachers and cooks. It has also promoted the purchase of fresh, nutritious produce from local farmers, and supports social protection for the poorest families and contributes to gender equality. Today, more than 86,000 school children in Cabo Verde benefit from school meals.⁹⁶



A school meal law or laws translates political commitment for school meals into action mandated, financed and overseen by parliament.

Laws and school meals

Laws set out the right or entitlement of students to the service, the obligations of government authorities to support the programme, the standards that the programme must meet and the institutional and organisational arrangements which will allow the programme to be delivered, monitored and funded. There are three categories of legislation that can be considered when making or reforming the law as it relates to school meals.

1. A framework law which is solely or overwhelmingly focussed on regulating the delivery of a school meal programme, or in some cases other school-based health and nutrition services of which school meals are a part.
2. Provisions that either create the entitlement to school meals or which govern aspects of a school meal programme in laws that are about other issues.
3. Other legislation which isn't directly related to school meals but which might have implications for them, such as laws on social protection, food standards, procurement, agricultural production or land use.

A sound legal framework for the provision of meals to children attending school will go beyond a single law, encompassing a set of laws, regulations or policies governing the different aspects that will enable quality school meals to be provided and for those meals to make the biggest positive difference.

Parliaments consequently have two distinct and critical roles to play in legislating for school meals: assessment and enactment.

Stakeholder engagement makes better laws

Assessing existing laws and enacting new laws will be improved by involving a broad range of stakeholders, including children themselves along with representatives of the education, health, agriculture and food sectors, relevant experts, and civil society organisations.

These stakeholders can provide valuable insights into the relevance of existing laws and are crucial to understanding the population's needs along with the

challenges that the sectors involved in school meals already face or might face in delivering a school meal programme.

Consulting other countries that have successfully implemented a school meal programme and whose education, agricultural and food sectors share commonalities along with similar socioeconomic indicators can also be useful.

Assessing your school meals policy framework

If a national or subnational parliament commits to school meals it must understand how the legal framework can positively or negatively influence the achievement of their goal for school meals. For this reason, the first role of parliamentarians is to ensure that the parliament and relevant authorities, including the responsible ministry, understand how existing laws relate to school meals.

The first question is whether a law on school meals already exists. However, as explained earlier the existence of a law specifically on school meals is not the only legislative measure that will help guarantee a quality school meal programme. What is needed is an assessment of the legal framework to identify the legal opportunities barriers to school meals including any gaps that must be addressed.

Conducting an assessment

An assessment of the existing legal and regulatory framework will help identify what legal solutions can be put in place to support the delivery of a school meal programme. Such an assessment can be conducted by a relevant government Ministry or might be undertaken by a parliamentary committee who will report on their assessment directly to parliament.

Key questions for assessment

Some questions that can be addressed during an assessment include, but are not limited to:

- Is there any law that establishes the right of school aged children to receive school meals, and the obligation of the Government to provide them?
- If not, would it be best, considering the national context, to develop a specific law on school meals, or would it be better to integrate the above right/ obligation into a wider legislation, e.g. a law on education, nutrition, social protection?
- If the national programme envisions sourcing food for school meals from smallholder farmers or other actors, do public procurement laws allow and facilitate this efficiently?
- Is there a need to establish specific regulations for procurement that are adapted to the capacities of the school meals procurement actors, and the objectives of the national programme without jeopardizing fundamental principles of public procurement (transparency, efficiency, accountability, inclusiveness)?
- Are there national rules and standards on nutrition and food safety and quality of food for public institutions or for school food? Can the school meals actors apply and comply with these regulations?

If not, these may need to be developed and adapted.

- Are there any taxation laws that apply to school meals (e.g. value-added tax on the purchases of food for a school meal programme), and could they be amended to support the affordability and sustainability of the programme?

An tool for assessing your school meals policy framework

One tool that can help parliamentarians and governments assess the status of the policy framework and advocate for its development is the Systems Approach for Better Education Results for School Feeding (SABER School Feeding). This is a tool that was developed by the World Bank, the World Food Programme, and the Partnership for Child Development with the purpose of supporting governments to self-assess their national school meals policies and programmes.

It focuses on five domains which effective school feeding programmes have, namely:

- a national policy framework;
- stable and predictable funding;
- sufficient institutional capacity for implementation and coordination;
- sound design and implementation; and
- community participation.

The tool is usually implemented through a multi-stakeholder consultative process that engages actors from governments, parliaments, civil society, and organisations. Parliamentarians can use the results of these assessments and engagements in these processes to conduct an assessment of the school meals policy framework, funding mechanisms, and implementation and advocate for improvements based on evidence.⁹⁷



Assessing existing laws and enacting new laws will be improved by involving a broad range of stakeholders.

Enacting laws for school meals

Once parliament has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing legal framework, the next step is to ensure that the relevant authorities – such as the ministry of education or agriculture – work with parliament to develop laws that support the design, implementation and monitoring of a school meal programme.

This entails building on the results of the assessment to propose, prioritise and enact legal solutions to deliver school meals.

When considering legislative options to deliver on the goal of school meals parliaments should take into account:

- the needs highlighted in the assessment, including how the law can be used to meet those needs.
- which authorities – legislative or administrative – are best placed to take the required legal action and, where applicable, whether the law should set out the role of subnational authorities in developing and implementing laws.
- the latest available health and nutrition evidence to help ensure the most effective measures are put in place.
- the country context, including political priorities, the needs of the population – especially the most vulnerable and marginalised children – and the human, financial and technical capacity to implement the approach to school meals being proposed.

Good legislation will define clear institutional responsibilities, establish inclusive participation, and coordination mechanisms among the different stakeholders involved, as well as encourage adequate budget allocation, and a framework for monitoring and enforcement.

The legal framework for food and nutrition in schools goes beyond a single law, it encompasses a set of laws and regulations governing the different and vital aspects of a holistic approach.

Particular attention must be paid to regulatory coherence for areas that are broader than food and nutrition in schools, and are thus regulated in their own sets of laws, notably food safety, public procurement and nutrition standards.

Ensuring linkages and coherence of School Food and Nutrition Law with these technical areas is among the key tasks of any specific laws that mandate a school meal programme.



Good legislation will define clear responsibilities and coordination mechanisms as well as adequate budget allocation, and a framework for monitoring and enforcement.

Possible provisions of a law on school meals

There are numerous issues to consider when making laws relating to school meals and the final shape and nature of the legal framework that is enacted to deliver a school meal programme will depend on the objectives that underpin the law and local context. Crucially the law must establish the obligation of the state to provide the resources to implement the law, which will involve the provision of the school meal programme that it mandates.

In its legal brief for parliamentarians 'Legislating for adequate food and nutrition in schools'⁹⁸ the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation identified the following possible provisions.

Scope and objectives	Include here the wider objective of the law and its specific objectives, e.g. "to fulfil children's right to adequate food at school, through a food systems approach providing children with healthy and sustainable food products" The scope of application - who is governed by the law and what activities and subject matters it covers, e.g. refer to who the rights holders are, and the duty bearers, including the obligation to protect and regulate third party activities and the specific responsibilities of different state authorities.
Definitions	This section provides important clarity of interpretation by clearly defining terms and concepts, such as: school food, school meals, food and nutrition education, school food environment, food ration/portion, Home Grown School Feeding, healthy eating habits, canteens, kiosks etc. Include definitions of all key terms and ensure the definitions are consistent with international/regional human rights law.
Guiding Principles	Set out the fundamental principles for all levels of government actions: e.g. participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, rule of law. The guiding principles will provide the solid base for interpretation of the law. Special protections for vulnerable people should also be expressly included - e.g. children with food allergies, diabetes or other special food needs, disabled children etc.
Entitlements	School meals should be recognized as legal entitlements accessible to every child who attends school without discrimination. Other elements can be included as entitlements, such as the nutritional value of school meals; their quantity; the frequency and duration of the school meal service; any costs; and accountability mechanisms available to remediate possible unsatisfactory service.
Institutional Arrangements	Clearly define the role of national and decentralised institutions and other stakeholders to ensure the adequate implementation of the programme. Establish clear mandates and responsibilities for the coordination of the various institutions, agencies and actors involved at national and decentralised level with clear regulations or reference for their action.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Food procurement	It is recommended to set out the regulatory instruments necessary to link school food and meals with local smallholder production. This can include a percentage goal of the procurement budget to be used on procurement of food directly from the defined target beneficiaries.
Preference Clause for Local Procurement	Special provision can be considered for purchases to include priority groups of more vulnerable producers, including women, members of indigenous communities and youth. This can strengthen target groups and provide them with a stable and predictable market for products.
Compliance with food safety legislation / food safety requirements	To avoid any negative impacts on students' health and nutritional status, and minimise or eliminate risks caused by unsafe water and sanitation or unsafe cooking, processing or preparation methods, it is vital to include regulatory provision for food safety and quality. This can include alignment with existing Food safety legislation and should cover food safety control over food purchased by the school.
Compliance with nutritional guidelines and standards	Specifically, the objective of nutrition guidelines and standards that apply to school meal programmes to ensure that meals meet an appropriate amount of the daily energy and nutrient requirements of the targeted children, are aligned with national Food-based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs), and respond to the possibilities of the school food system. When school meal nutrition standards are enshrined into national legal frameworks that are based on human rights, these become a key instrument for safeguarding children's right to food in schools.
School Food and Nutrition Education (SFNE)	Provision can be made here to clearly define how quality food and nutrition education will be integrated into the formal curriculum. Resources for covering food and nutrition education in the school budget can be specified. Legislation can also cover main sectoral responsibilities, minimum standards of quality, main priorities to address, core competences to achieve, minimum time requirement in the curriculum, capacity requirements of front-line educators, and main platforms of SFNE.
Food marketing at school	Regulations should include advertising and marketing aimed at children and permitted in or near to the school grounds particularly regarding highly processed foods and those high in saturated fat, salt and added sugars in line with nutritional standards and national FBDGs if available.
Food retailing rules	Regulations should include provision that all food distributed, and sold in schools must not only be safe, but also in line with children's nutrition needs and priorities. Specific standards would be developed in the implementing regulations.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Student, parent and community involvement	To ensure inclusive non-discriminatory participation, and for acceptable nutrition and menu choices, express provision should be made for the involvement of parents, school children, educators, parents' associations, local community groups, indigenous peoples and others, in decision making, and in review and accountability mechanisms.
Monitoring	Establish and define in detail a monitoring mechanism at central and decentralised levels, including its composition, and mandate, providing for stakeholder participation. Ensure transparency.
Accountability mechanisms / transparency	Expressly clarify the accountability of public officials, government and the mechanisms of accountability, including provision for the right to information in appropriate forms and languages and reporting obligations in relation to substantive and procedural requirements. Establish, or refer to accessible, effective grievance mechanisms, including judicial, administrative and community level grievance mechanisms, guaranteeing the right of appeal.
Sanctions and penalties	Establish sanctions for non-compliance.
Budget provisions	Provision must be made to guarantee transparent and adequate financing and the financing arrangements necessary for implementation. Consider provision for including Ministry of finance in the annual budget review and reaffirm the obligation guarantee every child's right to adequate food at school even at times of cutbacks. Include monitoring mechanisms to ensure financial transparency.
Final and transitory provisions	This can include any additional provisions stipulating for example the need to amend or review other related regulations or laws.



Case study: Brazil's school meals law

The law which establishes the guidelines for Brazil's National School Feeding Program (PNAE—Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar) is recognized worldwide as a reference among developing countries for its quality and sustainability.

The law sets out key elements of Brazil's school meal programme including, coverage and management, delivery time, type of food, the form of participation, public procurement, monitoring, and school gardens as a pedagogical tool as shown below.⁹⁹



Coverage: To all students enrolled in the public education system.



Public procurement: Of at least 30% of food from family farmers.



200 days: School feeding is offered every school day.



Monitoring and evaluation: Of the SFP.



Quality of food: Served in schools.



Management: Decentralized.



Community participation: In the management of the SFP.



School gardens: As a pedagogical tool for food and nutrition education.

Implementation

Laws are a tool, not an end in themselves. Laws designed to deliver school meals will only be effective if they are implemented and if they actually improve access to school meals, the quality of those meals and deliver the wider benefits that school meal programmes promise.

Parliaments' fourth responsibility is therefore to ensure that the relevant authorities effectively implement existing laws which we explore later in the toolkit.

Legislation checklist

- Establish the policy objectives of the school meal program you want to create, expand or improve.
- Assess existing legal provisions to determine whether any relevant laws or regulations exist, what opportunities and challenges they pose and what new laws or reforms to existing laws are needed to develop or improve the legal framework for school meals.
- Consult with the executive branch and stakeholder groups, including both experts and constituents, to identify legislative gaps and prioritise legislative needs.
- Consider whether this work could be done by a parliamentary committee and explore whether the committee is prepared to launch an inquiry into or examination of school meals.
- Work with the relevant ministry and the appropriate parliamentary authorities to draft legislation, including a framework law and reforms to other law to create a legal basis for the school meal programme.
- Collaborate within and across regions and work with regional and international parliamentary institutions to share lessons learned and experiences in legislating for school meals and school health and nutrition more widely.



3.4 Budget

Budget appropriation and enquiry are powerful tools parliament and parliamentarians have at their disposal. There are multiple steps in the budget cycle – planning, negotiation, spending and review – at which parliament and parliamentarians can shape and take all sorts of budget-related decisions in support of school meals.

Of particular importance are:

- agreeing clear objectives for the programme which includes which children will benefit, including if the programme is to be phased, how this will be done;
- knowing how much the desired school meal programme will cost, which should include a figure for the programme as a whole as well as an indication of the cost per child per year;
- a recognition that a school meal programme involves more than the cost of the food provided, but also the cost of quality assurance, procurement, infrastructure needs, monitoring, capacity strengthening of all actors, and the payment of cooks, all of which should be budgeted for;
- priorities for budget allocation in the event that the entire programme cannot be funded;
- where the programme will be funded from, including whether there a dedicated revenue streams being used or whether domestic resources are to be supported with external assistance;
- ensuring the programme is included as a line item in a national or ministry budget and if any allocations are required by sub-national governments;
- clarity on how the funding will be distributed and how that spending will be monitored;
- ensuring funding is provided and targeted to achieve the overall aims of the programme.

Ideally, budgets for school meals should not come from any single sector. So a law should ideally establish that the school meal programme is a national (or sub-national) priority programme funded mainly from the national (or sub-national) budget, and before that budget is distributed to sectors.



There are multiple steps in the budget cycle – planning, negotiation, spending and review – at which parliament can shape decisions in support of school meals.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Financing school meals

As we saw in part one of this toolkit the investment case for school meals is a compelling one.

School meals meet immediate needs of children, support the resilience of households, create employment in the supply chain and can be used to transform local agriculture. In an increasingly difficult context for public financing, investment in school meal programmes offers the prospect of high returns for communities and countries. The fact that there are more children being fed at school now than before the COVID pandemic demonstrates the growing awareness of and support for school meals.

While most of the public finance for school meal programmes has flowed through education budgets, government policies reflect a growing awareness of the multi-sectoral benefits across education, health and nutrition, social protection, and – increasingly – engagement with local agriculture.¹⁰⁰ This creates an opportunity for several ministries to back the financing of school meals, including by co-sponsoring the allocation of the required funds. Ideally the school meal programme

would be financed as an agreed multi actor priority in its own right and before the national budget is distributed to different sectors.

Domestic funding accounts for 98% of the funding for school meals globally which is more evidence of the growing recognition by governments that investing in school meals makes sense. However, government spending on school feeding is lowest where it is needed most, namely in low- income countries where only around 20% of school children receive school meals.

However, despite the challenges they face, since 2013 low- income countries have also increased the domestic share of financing. Donors still account for almost three-quarters of school meal financing in these countries and we look at the case for growing donor funding in these places later in the toolkit.¹⁰¹

The expansion of school meals is costly and in low- income countries, at an average annual cost of USD \$55 per pupil it exceeds total per pupil spending in education which averages just USD \$51 per year.¹⁰²



In 2021 Rwanda's Minister of Education announced that the government would achieve universal coverage of school feeding for basic education and increased its budget from US\$ 8 million in 2020 to US\$ 33 million in 2021.

Potential funding sources

Any parliament looking to establish, expand or improve school meal programmes will need to identify where the funding to do so will come from. There's no single blueprint for generating the revenue to fund any public service, including school meals, but there are several options worth considering.

These include:¹⁰³

Increasing general tax revenue

Most countries and especially lower income ones have some opportunities to expand government funding through progressive taxation, the removal of personal and corporate tax exemptions, and measures to reduce tax evasion.

Windfall taxes

Rising prices for energy has created windfall gains for some countries and/or energy companies. Capturing these gains through taxation can help finance safety net interventions.

Earmarked taxes

Many countries use earmarked taxes to link dedicated revenue streams to specified spending.

Taxing “public bads”

Using taxation to deter activities that are harmful, pay for the damage they cause, and support behaviour change is well-established.

In the field of public health, taxation is used to discourage consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and sugar. More than 50 countries around the world now tax beverages with high levels of sugar¹⁰⁴ and school meals which aim to improve children's diets are an obvious place to use the funding generated by taxes on sugar or other unhealthy products.

Development assistance

Domestic funding is the main source of funding for school meal programmes but overseas development assistance has an important part to play, especially in supporting programmes in low income countries.

Countries seeking to grow development assistance for their national school feeding strategy should ensure that the strategy is supported by credible financial planning. This means creating credible costing estimates, aligning targets with budget allocations, and engaging with external financing on the basis of a sustainable transition strategy.

Members of parliament in OECD countries have an important role to play in advocating that school meals are supported by their country's development assistance programme. More information on the role that MPs can play in growing development assistance for school meals is provided on the next few pages.

Monitoring and evaluation of the school meal programme, including by parliament, can play an important part in identifying inefficiencies and ensuring that these are addressed.

Ensuring spending on school meals is efficient

The costs of school meal programmes vary widely. The cost of school meals in 29 low-income countries found that in some the programme cost eight times as much as in others.¹⁰⁵

Whilst some of these cost differences can be accounted for by differences in food prices, wages and supply costs, the costs of administration, logistics, storage, and delivery infrastructure offer important opportunities for efficiencies.



The path to providing every child a nutritious meal every day at school can be paved by expanding access to school meals over time.

Universal or targeted provision?

One of the questions that needs to be answered in designing a school meal programme with direct implications for financing is whether the programme will be universal or targeted to benefit children facing the most significant disadvantages.

The stated aim of the School Meals Coalition is a healthy meal at school for every child, but there is recognition that the path to this aim can be paved by expanding access to school meals over time.

There are a variety of ways in which targeting can occur.

Some countries restrict school meals to a certain level of education with the majority providing school meals to children in primary school, with a significant reduction in the number of countries that provide school meals to secondary students. Geographic targeting is often used to concentrate resources in areas marked by high levels

of deprivation which might include rates of malnutrition, food insecurity or educational indicators, agricultural needs.

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, provide free school meals to children whose caregivers are in receipt of social security benefits or whose household income falls below a certain threshold.¹⁰⁶

All of these approaches have potential drawbacks, the impact of which will need to be assessed both for the overall policy goals of the programme and the available financing.

One important consideration that should be taken into account is the administrative complexity and transaction costs associated with targeting. Identifying who should be targeted and delivering the service to them can be a very intensive activity at every level of the programme.

Ensuring school meals have a dedicated budget line

Earlier in the toolkit we explore the important role that a legislative framework can play in ensuring and improving school meal programmes.

If a programme has a basis in law it has a better chance of being sustained and of being funded. That is because a legislative basis also increases the likelihood of the programme having a dedicated budget line which experience shows is an important factor in a programme being funded.

The Global Survey of School Meals Programme found a strong association between the coverage of school meal programmes and the presence of a national budget line. Countries with dedicated budget lines had a coverage rate that was 73% greater than countries who did not have one.¹⁰⁷

Budget checklist

- Work with government and external experts such as the School Meals Coalition Sustainable Financing Initiative to establish the cost of the desired school meal programme, ensuring all costs are included, both as a whole and on a per child basis.
- Agree on the objectives of your school meal programme and use these to shape how you will allocate the available funding.
- Agree that the school meal programme is a national multisectoral priority and will have its own budget that must be supported over time.
- Identify the benefits of the programme for the work of other ministries and work to secure their support for the programme.
- If required, explore the creation of specific funding streams to support the programme, including innovative funding sources.
- If you live in a country that receives donor funding, share your support for school feeding with donor representatives and invite them to support the funding of the programme.
- Track and analyse budgets to ascertain the amount of money allocated or needed to implement a school meal programme.
- If a programme exists ask schools about how the funding is delivered and monitored sharing what you find, both the challenges and what's going well, in parliament and with the responsible Minister. This activity could be undertaken by a parliamentary committee.



3.5 Oversight

Parliamentary oversight is one of the cornerstones of democracy. Oversight is a means for holding the executive accountable for its actions and for ensuring that it implements policies in accordance with the laws and budget passed by the parliament.

Types of parliamentary accountability

Parliamentarians can exercise oversight in relation to three types of accountability:

Financial accountability:

Ensuring that public resources that have been allocated to services, including school meals, are being used efficiently and effectively.

Performance accountability:

Demonstrating and accounting for performance against previously agreed targets, with a focus on the timely delivery of the service that meets the agreed standards that have ideally been set out in the relevant law.

Political/democratic accountability:

Using relevant institutions, procedures and mechanisms to ensure that the government delivers on its promises and commitments, aggregates and represents the interests of citizens, and responds to ongoing and emerging societal needs and concerns, in line with the available evidence about how best to do so.

Using parliamentary mechanisms to provide oversight

Parliaments have a variety of tools at their disposal for conducting oversight, but these will differ depending on the parliamentary system in question and how it operates.

The most common tools which will be relevant for overseeing a government's actions in respect of school feeding include:

Questions to ministers (oral and written):

Questions are intended to clarify government policies and establish whether and how effectively the policy is being implemented.

In respect of school meals the government can be asked:

- whether they have a position on school meals or whether they have considered developing a position on school meals;
- if they do support school meals what their plans are for developing and implementing a policy, including whether they have any plans for legislation;
- if a school meal programme exists questions can be asked about any aspect of its implementation;

Questions about the implementation of an existing programme might be informed by the views of stakeholders or research that has identified issues with the programme, such as a lack of consistent delivery, poor quality food, challenges in paying caterers and cooks.

If the aim is to expand coverage questions can also be asked about how this will be done. Government responses to parliamentary questions may lead to the publication of valuable information.



(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Hearings and inquiries:

Hearings either in plenary or committee meetings, are a primary tool of parliaments for obtaining information related to specific policies or issues.

Parliamentary committees are charged with overseeing the work of government departments and almost all parliaments will have a committee that has responsibility for overseeing the provision of education. Some parliaments allow committees to cooperate and undertake joint work. Given the multi sectoral nature of school meals, might be an opportunity for a joint committee initiative drawing on for example the education committee and the committee responsible for agriculture.

Budget oversight:

After the state budget has been passed, the parliament has an important role to play in monitoring how funds allocated to a ministry or for the delivery of a service, such as a school meal programme, are spent. This work is usually done by one key committee, such as a public accounts committee or budget and finance committee but can also be done by other functional committees, such as the education committee. Such scrutinising is often done in cooperation with a state auditing institution who might conduct an audit and then share the findings with parliament.

Cooperation with audit institutions:

Supreme audit institutions such as the auditor general (in Commonwealth countries), or Cours des Comptes (in Francophone countries) monitor how the government uses public money and informs the parliament of it's observations.

Whilst audit institutions are independent they often consult with parliament to determine what government programmes and ministries will be audited. If a school meal programme exists, encouraging an audit institution to audit its operation could be an effective way to establish the financial efficiency and effectiveness of the programme and agree priorities for improvement and reform.

Oversight checklist

- Establish clear processes and mechanisms in legislation to monitor and enforce the implementation of school meal programmes.
- Monitor and evaluate the short- and long- term effects of laws, in collaboration with independent research institutes, like the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition.
- Use relevant parliamentary procedures to scrutinise the government's policies, legislation, implementation and financing of school meals.
- Use parliamentary committees (such as health, food security and nutrition, education, children) to examine the state of child health and nutrition of if it already exists of the school feeding programme.
- Hold decision makers accountable and develop scorecard systems to make sure political commitments to nutrition and food systems are being realised.
- Establish contact with the audit institution that reports to parliament and explore whether an audit into an existing school meal programme or an examination of the cost and benefits of establishing a programme.

3.6 Growing global support for school meals

Part 2 of this toolkit detailed how school feeding programmes generate wide-ranging benefits for children and society.

Those benefits traverse the policy frontiers between health, nutrition, poverty reduction and education, creating virtuous circles of human capital development which drive progress across multiple sustainable development goals. On any assessment of the costs and returns, school feeding represents one of the best-buy investments available especially in countries marked by low levels of learning achievement, malnutrition, and poverty.

Home-grown school feeding programmes also create markets for farmers, with potential benefits for employment, income, and the development of sustainable food systems, which can help reduce emissions. In short, school meals offer a scalable solution to a wide range of global development challenges. However international support for school meals is low and fragmented.



In stark contrast to the governments and citizens of many developing countries, donors appear to attach limited importance to school meal programmes. Based on reported data - which is partial - between 2018 to 2020 only nine donors gave a total of more than \$1m to school meal programmes.

The exception is the United States where the McGovern Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition programme accounts for over 90 percent of aid to school feeding during the same period.¹⁰⁸ The McGovern-Dole program delivers aid principally in the form of surplus US agricultural commodities, supplemented by financial and technical assistance. While the programme has sought to support the development of self-reliant systems, the use of US commodities risks undermining support for home grown school feeding and its associated benefits.

Meanwhile the World Bank would appear to be well-placed to expand support for school meals financing. The \$93bn Replenishment of IDA 20 (2022-25) was the largest in its history and is the biggest single-source of international development financing for sub-Saharan Africa and low-income countries.¹⁰⁹ Health, education, and safety nets are among the stated priorities, but school meals are not mentioned.

Donors and Multilateral Development Banks using both humanitarian and development funding have an important role to play in helping low- and lower-middle-income countries expand, accelerate, and broaden their efforts to expand and improve the reach of school meal programmes.

(3) Parliamentary action in support of school meals

Members of parliament in donor countries have an important role to play in growing awareness of the contribution that school meals can make to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in general and specifically to tackling low levels of learning and high rates of malnutrition and poverty in developing countries. A growing number of OECD countries have joined the School Meals Coalition which suggests new opportunities to grow political understanding of and commitment to school meals as a priority for development and humanitarian assistance.

Members of parliament in OECD countries can:

- Call on their government to join the School Meals Coalition and announce how as a member it will support the expansion and improvement of school meal programmes globally.
- If their country is already a member of the School Meals Coalition, monitor the implementation of its stated pledges, including by asking the Minister for Development about them.
- Encourage their governments to develop and agree a policy setting out its support for school meals as part of the country's development and humanitarian assistance policy.
- Ensure that school meals are supported in issue and sector specific policies.
- Ask their government to work with the OECD Development Assistance Committee reporting system to better capture aid flows to school feeding programmes.
- Commit to financing school meals via their development and humanitarian funding.
- Ask their government to work with the World bank to prioritise school feeding.
- Support low and lower middle income countries make the transition towards domestic financing based on clear national commitments and multi-year financing aligned with a national strategy.
- Advocate for the recognition of the transformative role of cross-sectoral programmes like school meals in the next generation of SDGs.



Case study: MPs call on their governments to back school meals

Several members of parliament in OECD countries have been active in calling on their governments to join the School Meals Coalition.

After learning about the School Meals Coalition at the 148th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Irish MPs Deputy Denis Naughten and Senator Róisín Garvey are committed to seeing Ireland join the Coalition.¹¹¹

"Ireland is rightly expanding its school meal programme so joining the Coalition and being part of a group of countries that's committed to ensuring every child receives a healthy meal at school, every day will bolster our efforts and allow us to identify how we can help achieve that aim globally," said Deputy Naughten.

Case study: European parliament calls for more support for school meals

In its report on EU development cooperation to enhance access to education and training in developing countries the European Parliament's Development Committee recognised that "free school meals are not only vital for student health and learning, combating hunger and malnutrition, and increasing school enrolment, but also have a positive economic impact; insists that local food production based on agroecology and sustainable fisheries can significantly help fight poverty and hunger, while making populations less dependent on food supplies from external markets.

The report was adopted by the entire European Parliament and called for the "EU to support cooperation programmes that facilitate young people's access to free school meals".¹¹⁰



Member of the European Parliament György Hölvényi was the author of the Development Committee's report on EU development cooperation to enhance access to education in developing countries which called for more European support for school meals.

(4) Additional Resources

4.1 More information and support

More information and support for your work as a member of parliament in support of the creation, expansion or improvement of school meal programmes is available from the following organisations:



School Meals Coalition

The School Meals Coalition is a government-led initiative that together with partners from civil society drives action to urgently improve and scale up school meal programmes worldwide. Through its partner-led initiatives, the Coalition supports member states to address key bottlenecks to action by supporting better evidence on impact and value-for-money to guide decision making sustainable financing to better coordinate domestic and international funding reliable data, and sharing good practices across municipalities to support subnational programming.

 www.schoolmealscoalition.org  global.smcsecretariat@wfp.org



Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition

The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition is a global, independent research network, established in 2021 to support the (now) 97 countries of the School Meals Coalition in strengthening their national school meals programmes following COVID-19 school closures. With a small Secretariat based at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the Research Consortium works through global academic Communities of Practice to generate independent evidence and programmatic guidance on the design, cost, implementation, and impact of school meals and complementary school health programmes.

The Research Consortium's objectives are as follows:

1. Provide evidence on the effectiveness of school feeding programmes for learning, social and physical outcomes of children and youth across the world to make the case for investment in school-based health and nutrition programmes.
2. Provide policymakers and parliamentarians with programmatic guidance on the optimal policies to be implemented with regard to health, nutrition, and education.

 www.lshtm.ac.uk/shn  shnconsortium@lshtm.ac.uk



The International Parliamentary Network for education

The International Parliamentary Network for Education supports parliamentarians from around the world who are working to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Quality Education for All. The Network is committed to supporting members of parliament to take action in support of the creation, expansion and improvement of school meal programmes.

 www.ipned.org  info@ipned.org



World Food Programme

The World Food Programme (WFP) has six decades of experience supporting school meals and a trajectory of working with more than 100 countries to set up sustainable national school meal programmes. WFP's ultimate goal is to encourage and facilitate national government ownership of these programmes – a transition that has already happened in 50 countries. WFP primarily provides technical assistance to governments to improve the scale and quality of national programmes and to innovate and test new approaches. Through this work, WFP helps influence the quality of life, access to education and nutritional status of millions of schoolchildren. When needed, WFP also provides in-kind assistance. WFP is also the proud secretariat of the government-led School Meals Coalition. WFP has a presence in over 120 countries and territories. Contact details for the WFP country offices are available at: www.wfp.org/countries  www.wfp.org



Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations that leads international efforts to defeat hunger and address malnutrition. The organisation generates, collates and shares data on agrifood systems and diets, develops evidence-based technical guidance, builds technical and policy capacity, and convenes and participates in dialogues to catalyse policy and legal coherence and collective action. FAO has established a strong collaboration with parliamentarians worldwide to provide technical support for the enacting and implementation of appropriate laws on food security and nutrition and increasing advocacy on these issues at the highest levels. Collaboration is currently ongoing with the Parliamentary Front Against Hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean, the European Union's Parliamentary Alliance "Fight against Hunger" and the Pan-African Parliamentary Alliance for Food and Nutrition Security. In addition to regional parliamentary collaboration, FAO provides technical support to several national parliamentary alliances for food security and nutrition. More than 20 such alliances have been established and more than 20 laws have been passed by various countries. In 2021 FAO and the Inter Parliamentary Union co-published a Handbook for Parliamentarians on Food Systems and Nutrition which can be viewed at:

 www.fao.org/3/cb2005en/cb2005en.pdf

 www.fao.org/partnerships/parliamentary-alliances/en/



Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition

The Sustainable Financing Initiative (SFI) for School Health and Nutrition is an initiative of the School Meals Coalition that works with governments and donors to help countries develop multi-year financing strategies for school meal programmes with a particular focus on low- and lower-middle-income countries. The initiative conducts analysis on donor, domestic, and innovative financing mechanisms that governments can utilise to sustainably finance their school feeding programs. The SFI works with governments to support the development of national strategies for financing high-quality school meals programmes, including estimating the full costs of school meals programmes (and possible areas for efficiencies), developing allocation strategies (with focus on equity), understanding existing funding, and developing options for addressing the gaps from domestic and international resources. The initiative disseminates its findings with key actors to influence country governments and international actors to invest more in sustainable financing of school meals programs.

 www.edc.org/sustainable-financing-initiative-school-health-and-nutrition

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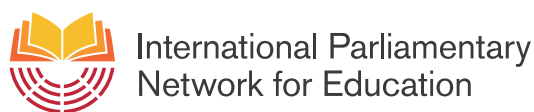
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School meals: A toolkit for parliamentarians

Momentum to ensure that every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030 is growing. This toolkit has been published to support members of parliament contribute to the goal. It provides an introduction to school meals along with evidence of the impact that well-designed school meal programmes have on human capital, social protection, agriculture, climate and the environment, education during crises and for gender equality. Finally, it also provides suggestions for how members of parliament can exercise their responsibilities to represent their constituents, advocate, legislate, budget and provide oversight of government action in support of school meal programmes.

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