

SAVING
LIVES
CHANGING
LIVES



A CHANCE FOR EVERY SCHOOL CHILD

Partnering to scale up school health
and nutrition in the COVID era

*In January 2020, the World Food Programme (WFP) launched its new strategy in support of school health and nutrition for the school children of the world. One month later COVID-19 emerged and within weeks became a pandemic that led to 1.6 billion school children being excluded from schools globally by March 2020. School health and nutrition were always important for the growth and development of school children, but in this new COVID world they are even more important. This is a call to action: for governments, partners and WFP staff to help countries **now** to maintain care and support for the out-of-school children, and **next** to use school health and nutrition programmes as a key incentive for families to send their children back to school, and to build back schools better.*

THE SHOCK OF THE COVID PANDEMIC: A STARK REMINDER OF THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD HEALTH AND NUTRITION AT SCHOOL AGE

The WFP strategy, launched in January 2020, offers a new vision of how WFP aims to assist countries worldwide to support the development of their people. WFP will advocate globally and act locally, working in partnership to help guarantee a proper school health and nutrition response for children in schools. The Strategy lays out for governments, partners and WFP staff worldwide, what to expect from WFP in the next ten years, what the priorities and roles will be, and how WFP plans to change its way of working to provide more and better support to governments and children.

A month after the Strategy was launched, COVID arrived. In February 2020, the COVID-19 crisis erupted and became a world-wide pandemic: by mid-March most governments world-wide had resorted to lockdowns. The lockdowns have had well known consequences for the adult population, but the associated school closures have also led to less widely understood consequences for the 90 percent of the world's school age children who no longer have access to school. Almost overnight, 1.6 billion children found themselves out of school, with the greatest impact on those poor countries with the youngest populations, where school age children can make up some 40% of the total population.

These children were immediately deprived of their education, but not that alone. Schools are also where children, especially the poorest, get vital nutrition and health support that allows them to learn and, in the poorest communities, are among the most important point of access for family safety nets. Schools are where poor families access support and incentives, both financial and non-financial, aimed at addressing structural inequalities. Without the school platform, and without the access to such safety nets, issues like hunger, poverty and

malnutrition are exacerbated for hundreds of millions of children and their families, affecting their chances of ever recovering from the COVID crisis.



Yaya Ousmanou, headteacher of Section 2B, assists a parent washing her hands before entering the school. Cameroon.

Yaya is one of the 88 headteachers of primary schools working to ensure that pupils receive nutritious food, as they continue studying from home.

This is a call for governments, partners and WFP staff to recognize that school health and nutrition programmes are more important than ever in the COVID and post-COVID era given the socioeconomic effects of the crisis on the most vulnerable children and their families.

In this COVID era, WFP's 2020 - 2030 strategy and its partnership approach to school health and nutrition have become even more relevant. In response, WFP is redoubling its efforts now to support countries in maintaining care and support for out-of-school children, and commits to strengthen support to governments, in partnership with other United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector, as they reopen and seek to build back even better education systems.

WHY HEALTH AND NUTRITION AT SCHOOL AGE MATTER, AND NOW MATTER EVEN MORE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Even without health crises such as the COVID19 pandemic, pervasive inequalities as a result of poverty, migration, conflict, and climate change threaten the lives and future of children across the world. Malnutrition in all its forms remains a major cause of morbidity and mortality among children, and the trends are rising.

The evidence is clear: nutritional deficiencies leave school children vulnerable to poor cognitive and physical development, hampering their ability to learn and thrive.

Investment in health and nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life is crucial to establish a strong trajectory in development. Investment in the next 7000 days to adulthood is also important to sustain the early gains, to support children during vulnerable phases during later development, and to offer opportunities for catch-up, especially during the adolescent growth spurt.

“Ramped-up school feeding programs can have positive impacts on school re-enrollment and attendance, while helping mitigate nutritional shortfalls students may have experienced during school closures.” World Bank

In many low-income countries, the children in middle childhood and adolescence account for almost 40 percent of the total population. Supporting this age group is the key to future health and wellbeing, good education outcomes, and the development of life-long healthy behaviours, including good dietary habits.

These young people are the future human capital of nations, and the basis of future productivity of countries globally. The dramatic variation in the World Bank’s Human Capital Index across the world’s economic regions highlights the importance of investing in young people today. Countries which invest in providing learning but fail

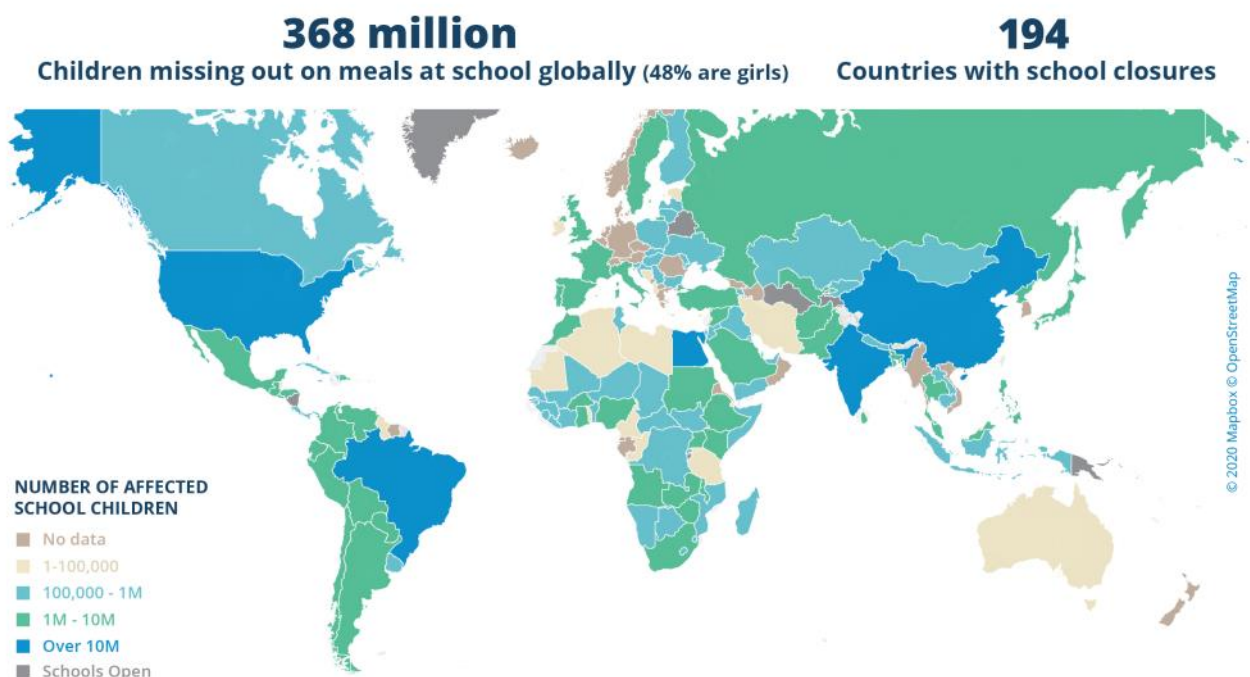
to invest in the nutrition and health of the learner may stumble on the growth and development path.

The COVID-19 crisis makes this all much worse. With schools closed, learning for 1.6 billion children has been compromised, especially for those living in low-income countries and poor households. Issues such as lack of access to internet connectivity, educational levels of parents and limited capacity of education systems to sustain remote learning efforts only exacerbate already existing inequalities.

Adolescent girls and other groups which systematically lack equal access to education are at particular risk. Removed from the school environment, the risk that children will be neglected, abused, or exploited increases, especially for girls. The heightened socioeconomic challenges faced by many households can only increase the already high risks of early marriage, early and unwanted pregnancy, and gender-based violence for girls, and possible recruitment by non-state actors in conflict affected countries.

School closure means that, about 370 million school children are missing out on school meals and other types of health support from which they had previously benefitted. For the poorest children in the poorest communities, the daily school meals were often the most important source of nutrients for children provided during this critical window of development. School meals additionally serve as a resource transfer to many of the world’s poorest families, often representing some 10 to 15 percent of household income per child fed at school. All this has now stopped for millions of children and their families.

Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures



To support children and their families and protect gains in human capital development there is urgent need to provide support to governments while schools are closed and as they re-open. The consequences of inaction are very high. Lessons learned from the Ebola experience tell us that the longer children stay out of school, the less likely they are to return. Without incentives like school meals, child grants and health and sanitation services designed to bring children back to school, an entire generation of children may be left out, especially girls. Some children will never fully recover unless specific and targeted actions are taken, especially in low-income countries.

The COVID-19 crisis threatens to worsen education-related outcomes on many fronts, with large potential costs to human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. At the same time, investments in human capital development of children continue to be among the most effective and productive investments that countries can make. Failing to invest in a well-nourished healthy and education population undermines recovery and economic development. Underinvestment in human capital will further hold countries back to overcome the economic crisis and to reach their economic potential.

WFP PARTNERING IN AN EFFECTIVE GLOBAL RESPONSE: AN INTEGRATED AND MULTISECTORAL APPROACH TO SCHOOL HEALTH AND NUTRITION WHEN RE-OPENING SCHOOLS

Countries have an opportunity to use this crisis to build more inclusive, efficient, and resilient education systems, with an integrated school health and nutrition package, at scale. Policy responses will be required to help education systems cope with the immediate impacts of school closures, followed by managing continuity, and improving and accelerating learning.

What countries are doing now: In the coping phase there is a need to protect health and safety and to prevent learning losses, with the priority being to control the pandemic. Key mechanisms for promoting the health of families and communities during the period of school closure include hygiene campaigns and supplemental nutrition programs to mitigate nutritional deficits arising from school closures and the suspension of school feeding programs.

Around 70 countries have adapted their programmes to continue supporting children during school closures. Support is being provided through take-home rations, vouchers or cash transfers to ensure families can buy the food they were receiving through schools. Other recommended strategies include increasing the economic allocation of social protection programs (such as cash transfers) by an amount corresponding to the cost of food rations delivered by school feeding programs and

providing exemptions from taxes on basic foodstuffs for families with school-age children, especially for workers in the most affected economic sectors.



Father and son with their take-home ration outside the school. Congo.

WFP launched its 'school feeding at home' initiative through the provision of take-home rations consisting of rice, peas, vegetable oil, salt and sardines.

What countries are planning to do next: When planning the reopening of schools the priority should be to prevent possibly irreversible reductions in enrolment, to close learning gaps, to be sensitive to new vulnerabilities, to act upon equity gaps and to make up for the lost time to avoid permanent impacts in the human capital of children and young people currently in school age. School meals are one of the most effective incentives for families to send their children back to school, especially girls.

A collective effort will be needed to safeguard the return to as safe school environment with improved education infrastructure, data systems and school health and nutrition services. Many of these children received elements of an integrated package of school health and nutrition, prior the crisis but these interventions rarely reached the poorest children who needed them the most. Estimates prior the crisis suggested that needed investments in an essential school health package for all vulnerable children represents some 2.5 percent of the current annual investment in primary education, with a benefit-cost ratio estimated at around USD 20 for every dollar invested.

WFP's Strategic Response

WFP has stepped up its work and engagement with partners as part of its response to the crisis because we believe it can be more effective if combined and coordinated with other actors in the education, food security, social protection and nutrition space.

At the global level, WFP joined the UNESCO led coalition of agencies and partners to make sure Learning Never Stops, in response to the COVID-19 crisis. As part of these efforts, WFP has collaborated with FAO and UNICEF to issue guidance for governments on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the food and nutrition of schoolchildren. Most recently, WFP joined UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank in launching a framework to inform decision-making on when to reopen schools and are supporting national preparations to guide the implementation process.

“When re-opening schools, re-establish regular and safe delivery of essential services: critical nutrition, WASH and health services, school feeding, vaccination campaigns, protection referrals and specialized services for children with disabilities. ”

UNESCO, UNICEF, WB, WFP

At the operational level, WFP and UNICEF announced a joint initiative in March to help governments ensure that children's access to nutritious school meals is restored safely along with essential services that reinforce public health including safe water, hygiene and sanitation.

WFP will continue to take a context-specific approach and adapt its roles to the particular country situation, in partnership with UN agencies, the private sector, international financial institutions and NGOs and focus specifically on ensuring that school children living in extreme poverty are reached.

WFP can support governments to make decisions along the following stages during and after the crisis:

- While schools are closed, and governments seek to provide alternative school feeding modalities, WFP will support the identification of such modalities and support linkages with social safety-nets. Options

range from take-home rations, vouchers, to cash transfers, and family pick-up points, integrated within broader social protection responses.

- During school re-opening WFP will work with governments focusing on providing a safe environment for learning, wellbeing and enhanced protection of children. WFP will help governments ensure that children's access to nutritious school meals is restored safely along with essential services that reinforce public health including safe water, hygiene and sanitation. Special attention will be given to the well-being and protection and an inclusion of the most marginalized.

WFP will implement this through a context-specific approach:

1. **In fragile settings or countries that are set to be hardest hit by the socioeconomic effects of the COVID crisis, WFP will scale up by providing operational support.** Subject to availability of resources, WFP will seek scale up its coverage and operate programmes in countries with limited capacities to ensure vulnerable children are reached. Implementation modalities will be adjusted as appropriate to follow national protocols and to address a changing environment.
2. **In stable low-income and lower-middle-income countries WFP will support and complement national programmes.** WFP will help to complement and augment national school meal services in countries that have emerging capacities and are working on improving the scale and quality of national programmes. This will include modality readjustments to promote a safe school environment, responding to the changing circumstances and addressing additional vulnerabilities. WFP will work with governments on needed policy and system changes and informed decision making.
3. **In middle-income countries WFP will support the consolidation and strengthening of national programmes.** In these countries, with stronger education infrastructure and capacities, WFP will support governments with innovative approaches to respond to the crisis. WFP will offer advice, services and technical expertise needed to adjust and improve national school feeding programmes.

At the corporate level, WFP has put together four work streams to support the response and invest in a medium to longer term recovery phase.



Work stream 1 – Sharing knowledge and best practice globally.

WFP will conduct research and document and share global evidence on the impacts of school feeding at large and specifically focus on the learning crisis expected as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, including the fostering of south-south cooperation, lessons learned, good practices, standards and norms more effectively to inform national decision making and contribute to high quality programming. A research consortium managed by an academic partner, will include the impact of COVID-19 and the different government responses on the learner into the research agenda for school feeding.



Work stream 2 – Increasing the investment in school feeding, health and nutrition.

The UN Secretary General identified financial support to school feeding as one of the priorities to address the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In low-income and fragile countries, WFP will work with partners to increase funding to sustain integrated school health and nutrition support, including through CERF, MPTF and Education Cannot Wait. In middle-income countries, the fiscal space for education and other investments is likely shrinking. WFP will help governments identify sources of funding to provide technical assistance and to increase capacity in a more comprehensive and sustainable way.



Work stream 3 – Acting in partnership to improve and advocate for school health and nutrition.

WFP will continue to champion the issue of school health and nutrition globally and advocate for its prioritization in the medium- and short-term response to the COVID crisis. It will work with partners to ensure that the additional elements of the essential integrated package for children, which are not part of the mandate or areas of expertise of WFP but are nevertheless crucial for children, are provided in an integrated way. WFP will continue its work with UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO, Global Partnership for Education, World Bank and Education Cannot Wait. It will also mobilize the support of the private sector and NGOs to support governments expand access these vital programmes.



Work stream 4 – Strengthening programmatic approaches in key areas.

WFP will continue to develop assessments and tools to inform decisions on targeting, transfers and transfer modalities. It will assess school health and nutrition infrastructure and service delivery gaps, advise on needed policy and protocol adjustments and roll out digital solutions to better manage and track the results of the programmes.