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Policy Brief

SCHOOL FEEDING AMIDST A PANDEMIC: PREPARING FOR THE NEW NORMAL IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Introduction

This policy brief highlights the key findings and lessons learnt from the research study “School feeding amidst a pandemic: Preparing for the new normal in Asia and the Pacific”, conducted by Oxford Policy Management and commissioned by the World Food Programme (WFP) Regional Bureau Bangkok.

The key research question was: **How has COVID-19 impacted policy, design, and implementation and monitoring of School Feeding programmes in Asia and the Pacific region?**

The region comprises a diverse set of countries which had vastly different School Feeding (SF) programmes prior to the onset of COVID-19. This research sought to answer the key research question through an emphasis on gathering data primarily from six countries in the region where WFP supports SF programmes in different capacities: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented school closures and millions of children did not receive school meals last year

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 129 million children in the WFP Asia and the Pacific region received meals in school, mainly through national SF programmes (see figure 1).

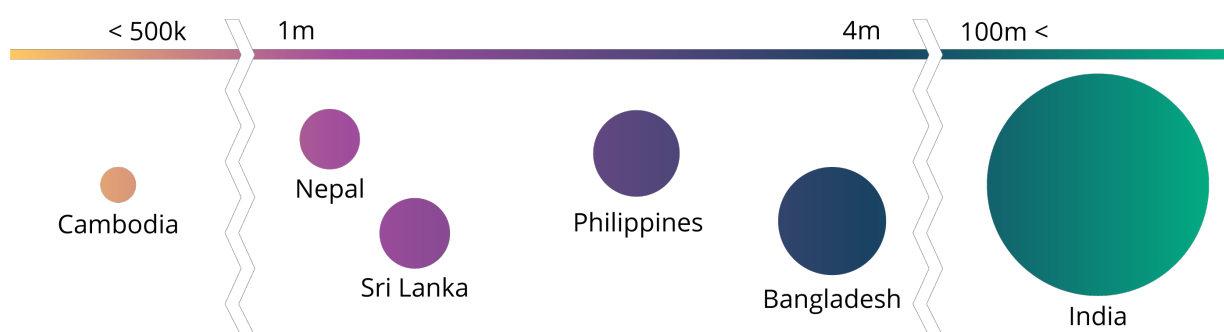
Coverage rates varied across sampled countries: ranging from 56% of primary school children in Sri Lanka to 15% in Cambodia. A range of modalities were used in the SF programmes in the sampled countries. In Cambodia, India, and Nepal, a hot in-school or on-site meal was provided to primary school children, while in Bangladesh the SF programme predominantly distributed micronutrient fortified biscuits. In Cambodia, the most vulnerable children were also given either take-home rations (THR), or cash, to provide them with an additional incentive to attend school on a regular basis. Along with in-school meals, Sri Lanka and Philippines distributed milk to some primary school students in selected schools.

In the pre-COVID-19 period, WFP supported the scale-up and transition of SF programmes in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal; and provided technical assistance, support to innovation, and advocacy in India, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. In Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Nepal, WFP promoted home-grown SF (HGSF), a SF modality that uses locally procured commodities to support small-scale farmers and suppliers.

Across the sampled countries SF programmes served a range of objectives: addressing short-term hunger; acting as safety nets during crises; ensuring nutrition security; and incentivising school enrolment, attendance, and retention.

Complementary services such as micronutrient supplementation, deworming, nutrition education, menstrual hygiene management, and water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions, – were provided alongside SF, but usually as standalone services rather than as an integrated health and nutrition package.

Figure 1: Number of children receiving a meal in school in the sampled countries prior to COVID-19



In many countries in Asia and the Pacific region, on-site School Feeding Programmes were adapted into Take Home Rations or cash transfers to respond to the crisis

By the end of March 2020, all six sampled countries had closed their schools with no in-person learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, on-site SF programmes were adapted to varying degrees, mostly into THRs.

	CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW	BEFORE COVID-19	DURING COVID-19 (2020)
BANGLADESH	SF programme in poverty-prone areas is implemented in selected sub-districts and is universal within these areas. Primarily funded by the Government of Bangladesh and with support from WFP and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole.	Combination of Micronutrient Fortified Biscuits and hot cooked meals.	Bi-monthly distribution of 50 Micronutrient Fortified Biscuits packets to students' homes to all eligible enrolled students. Adaptations covered all prior recipients.
CAMBODIA	SF implemented in selected government-supported and WFP-supported schools. Traditional SF and HGSF (supported by WFP and USDA McGovern-Dole), implemented by the government. Targeting is based on socioeconomic characteristics. Primarily financed by development partners.	On-site cooked breakfasts and mid-day meals; THR and cash transfers also provided to some students.	THR of rice and oil. Adaptations did not cover all prior recipients.
INDIA	The Mid-Day Meal Programme is government-led and funded. Provided to all students in government and government-aided primary and upper primary schools, Special Training Centres, and Madrassas and Maqtabs supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Funding is shared between the centre and states and implementation is by state governments. Policy guidance is provided by the centre.	One cooked in-school mid-day meal every school day.	Food Security Allowance consisting of food grains and either cash to students to cover cooking cost or a set of ingredients equivalent to the cooking cost. Adaptations covered all prior recipients, including potentially new recipients.
NEPAL	The National School Meals Programme comprises government-led SF programme, as well as the WFP- and USDA-supported Food For Education Project, in seven districts. Government-led SF was implemented in 34 districts in 2019. SF was made universal for primary schools in all 77 districts in 2020. Primarily financed by the government.	On-site cooked meal.	School meals were adapted only in Food For Education Project districts where THR (rice, lentils, oil) were distributed. Majority of schools did not receive any adapted form of SF.
PHILIPPINES	SF is led by the government. The national School Based Feeding Programme targets learners based on nutritional status. In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the School-Based Feeding Programme is moving towards a universal approach and is supported by WFP.	Hot meals and milk (in selected schools) for national programme. Hot meals in BARMM.	THR comprised enhanced nutrient and milk for national School Based Feeding Programme. Rice was discouraged. Adaptations were late in national programme but reached all prior recipients. Adaptations in BARMM delayed till 2021 – will comprise fortified rice and commodities (eggs, anchovies, and mung/mung beans).
SRI LANKA	The National School Nutrition Programme and the School Milk Programme are government-led and funded; priority is given to marginalised areas. A HGSF pilot is supported by WFP in selected districts.	Daily cooked in-school meals and one glass/ packet of milk.	THR food pack consisting of eggs, Samaposhha or cereal made of corn, soya, green gram and rice, noodles, Marie biscuits, and chickpeas. Adaptations covered all prior recipients.

Note: Data on the coverage of adaptations are not easily available. This is also influenced by variation in coverage of different rounds of THRs, as well as differences in composition across rounds. Importantly, even in countries where adaptations were intended for all prior recipients, actual receipt of benefits is likely to have been lower due to operational challenges.

The pandemic has not ended: school closures and SF disruptions continue to adversely affect children, and SF adaptations on their own are insufficient to fully address adverse child-level outcomes

Adaptations of on-site SF programmes into THRs helped reduce food insecurity and hunger for many children. However, these were not ideal substitutes for a nutritionally-balanced and adequate school meal especially as intra-household sharing resulted in dilution of support to the intended recipients i.e. primary-school-age children. For them to receive a nutritional equivalent of on-site SF through THR, considerably larger resources would be needed. SF adaptations often relied on existing procurement, delivery, identification and communication systems. This helped deliver timely support in many countries, with the support of school staff, parents and community members. As with regular on-site SF, children enrolled in low-cost private schools and out-of-school children missed out on this form of support.

Though the pandemic is ongoing, critical lessons from over a year of disruptions to education critical lessons were learnt. COVID-19 has negatively impacted children (see figure 1). It has exacerbated inequality in access to quality education as children from poorer households, those living in remote areas and children with disabilities have poorer access to remote learning. Even those who can access remote education learn less. The risk of increased child labour and early marriages has increased. Emerging evidence points towards a rise in food insecurity amongst poorer households, worsening dietary practices and greater levels of stress and anxiety.

Safe on-site SF must eventually resume as part of an integrated school health and nutrition package and in the interim, adaptations to SF must improve

SF was not universal before the onset of COVID-19. This gap in coverage was exacerbated by the pandemic where SF adaptations could not keep pace with the scale of need. THRs and cash transfers, whilst necessary as a ‘stop-gap’ measure,

Figure 1: Impact of COVID-19 on children

EDUCATION	HEALTH & WELLBEING	PROTECTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vast digital divide affecting access to remote learning • Poorer quality of education • Children dropping out and not re-enrolling • Irreversible learning loss • Shift from low-cost private schools to free public schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine services such as vaccinations and nutrition interventions were suspended or limited • Household incomes reduced affecting food intake and nutrition gains (<i>undernutrition</i>) • Worries of increased obesity (<i>overnutrition</i>) given sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy eating practices • Increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression due to isolation, uncertainty and fear of the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harm to vulnerable children especially children with disabilities and girls • Increased physical and emotional abuse including online bullying • Financial insecurity induced harmful social norms such as child labour and early marriage • Gaps in childcare in the absence of schools

cannot be a long-term solution for reducing child hunger and improving nutrition and education outcomes. At the same time, the pandemic is far from over. Repeated waves of infection continue to disrupt education across the region.

Most governments have developed guidelines or school reopening frameworks, often supported by development partners such as WFP. In some countries, schools have remained closed for extended periods of time whilst others have seen repeated school closures. Vaccination rates in the region are low and governments continue to grapple with extremely difficult trade-offs between safe reopening of schools and closures to prevent community transmissions.

Hungry children cannot learn – whether at home or in school. It is now time for policy makers and SF advocates to find effective ways to deliver nutritionally-balanced, adequate meals to children during periods of school closures. This should be done in conjunction with planning to build-back better when schools do resume, ensuring higher coverage, greater dietary diversity, use of local suppliers and provision of complementary services.

SF programmes must continue to be the focus of governments, as well as development partners when seeking to redress the terrible impact of COVID-19 on children.

Below, some key recommendations are highlighted for governments, as well as developing partners supporting SF, such as WFP.

Key recommendations:

WFP, and developing partners supporting SF should:

1. Consider risks of repeated school closures, as well as the changes brought about by the pandemic, in their internal programming. More than a year after the start of the pandemic, WFP and developing partners supporting SF should develop immediate, as well as medium- to long-term solutions for delivering adequate, nutritious meals to primary-school-age children. These should be reflected in country-level strategies.
2. Continue to advocate for investment in integrated school health and nutrition services through expanded and improved SF programmes. This means supporting inclusion

of SF in government nutrition and social protection policies, as well as coordinated efforts across development partners and line ministries.

3. Invest in and support systematic research on the impact of SF suspensions and new challenges emerging for primary-school-age children. Emerging concerns include exclusion of children enrolled in low-cost private schools; child obesity and overweight due to poor dietary practices; and leaving education too early due to early marriages, child labour, or poorer learning.
4. Accelerate joint efforts with partners to develop a coordinated strategy and plan for safe school reopening and consider effective SF measures in the event of repeated school closures. The emerging global School Meals Coalition is an ideal platform to do this.

Governments should:

1. Consider repeated disruptions to schooling and associated impacts on health and nutrition in their government policy, planning and budgeting. Guidance and support should be provided to local level governments as they cope with repeated school closures, particularly on how to operationalise adequate, nutritionally-balanced THRs and engage with local suppliers of HGSF programmes.
2. Continue to prioritise investments in SF as part of a multi-sectoral effort to address school health and nutrition. Future financing for SF should be ring-fenced and SF included as a key targeted programme for primary-school-age children in nutrition, education, and social protection policies. This is especially important in the aftermath of the pandemic which has worsened child-level outcomes.
3. Learn valuable lessons from each other in how to better adapt SF during repeated school closures. Knowledge can be shared more widely through regional platforms such as the ASEAN and SAARC and participating in initiatives such as the global School Meals Coalition.

This global policy brief is based on Farhat M. & Sanyal R. (2021). School feeding amidst a pandemic: Preparing for the new normal in Asia and the Pacific: Final Report. Oxford Policy Management; the World Food Programme. Oxford, UK, June 2021.