



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Two Minutes on School Feeding

About School Feeding

Making sure children are healthy and well-nourished while in school is crucial to their ability to learn and thrive. School feeding as part of an integrated school health and nutrition package supports children to become better learners in school and to improve their overall wellbeing. Very simply: sick children cannot attend school, and hungry children cannot learn. WFP understands school feeding as the provision of meals, snacks or take-home incentives through schools conditional upon the attendance of children:

In-School Meals and Snacks: Children are provided with breakfast, lunch or both, while in school. Meals are either prepared at the school, in the community or are delivered from centralised kitchens. Some programmes provide complete meals, while others provide fortified foods such as rice or nutritious snacks, high-energy biscuits or date bars. As often as possible, food is procured locally.

Take-home Incentives: Families receive food and/or cash rations on the condition that their children attend school regularly. In-school meals, combined with these incentives, help to lower drop-out rates and bring more out-of-school children into the classroom.

The need for School Feeding

School meals are an essential safety net which helps to ensure that every child has access to education, health and nutrition. For the more vulnerable students, enrolling in school, attending regularly and learning is often made more difficult by illness, hunger and malnutrition. In many parts of the world, children from vulnerable families are often pulled out of school when they are needed to work at home. When girls are out of school, they are more vulnerable to forced marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence. For these children and their families, a daily meal or snack can be a strong incentive for families to keep their children, especially girls, in school.

The Multiple Benefits of School Feeding

Every US\$1 invested in school feeding yields up to US\$9 economic return, owing to improved health, education and productivity:

Education and learning: School feeding programmes promote education by removing barriers to accessing classrooms and learning. A daily meal at school allows children to focus and helps increase enrolment and attendance, promotes retention rates and improves cognitive abilities. Studies have shown programmes can increase enrolment by an average of 9 percent. In areas where there are prevalent barriers to education, including child labour, early marriage, or gender inequalities, school feeding programmes may be tailored to target specific groups of children (e.g., adolescent girls, children from marginalised communities etc.).

Nutrition and health: In vulnerable and marginalised communities, nutrition-sensitive school feeding can offer children a regular source of nutrients that are essential for their mental and physical development. WFP strives to include fortified and fresh foods to ensure meals are as nutritious as possible. When school meals are combined with de-worming and micronutrient fortification, the effects of such investments are multiplied. Moreover, for the growing number of countries with the double burden of malnutrition (undernutrition and emerging obesity problems), well designed school meals can help set children on the path towards healthier diets and behaviours.

Social protection and safety nets: School feeding is one of the most common safety nets, providing the daily support and stability that vulnerable families and children need. School feeding reaches into the heart of poor communities and benefits the children directly. The food provided is seen by families as having real value, often substituting for around 10 percent of the family income for every child fed throughout the year. For families with several children, that can mean substantial savings, which can help break the inter-generational cycle of hunger and poverty that affects the world's most vulnerable areas, contributing to improving their livelihood prospects.

Local economies and agriculture: Through home-grown school feeding approaches, food is sourced directly from smallholder farmers and local traders. Buying local food creates stable markets, boosts local agriculture, impacts rural transformation and strengthens local food systems, especially for smallholder farmers. This injects money into the local rural economy and can stimulate income opportunities. WFP supports home-grown school meals programmes in 40 countries, and there is growing demand from national governments for technical assistance in this area.

Building social cohesion and peace

When societies break down, inequalities are often exacerbated. In recent years, school feeding has been increasingly used in crisis and conflict-affected countries, to cover the needs of the most vulnerable children, including most recently as part of the global COVID-19 emergency response.

School feeding can play an essential role in crisis response as it provides a sense of normality in traumatic circumstances. As a tool for increasing access to education, school feeding in emergencies may contribute to the protection of children against age-specific threats, such as recruitment into armed forces and groups, forced and/or early marriage, and other forms of child labour.

School feeding features prominently as a tool for generating positive outcomes towards stability, cohesion and peacebuilding by providing a safe space to engage in dialogue, which in turn could potentially be extended to other, more contentious, issues. It becomes an essential part, not only of humanitarian and protection assistance but also of the hope for a more peaceful future with stronger social cohesion. Of the total number of children participating under a WFP-supported school feeding programme in 2020, 5.9 million received school meals in humanitarian emergency settings affected by conflict or natural disasters.

A global call to action to leave no child behind

In early 2020, school feeding programmes delivered more meals than ever before, to 388 million children, or one out of every two primary school children worldwide. This historic progress was the culmination of a decade of action by governments and their partners. However, there was still

work to be done. Even at the record numbers of children reached in early 2020, 73 million of the most vulnerable girls and boys in 60 lower-income and low-income countries still had no access to school meals.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought this decade of progress to a sudden halt. In April 2020, during the height of the crisis, almost all countries closed their schools, leaving 370 million school children without access to the one meal a day they could rely on. This crisis has illustrated the value of the meals to children, their families and their social safety net function during crises. It has also highlighted the value of the education system and that there is no substitute for well-functioning schools, which include school health and nutrition interventions.

Meeting the needs of those left behind is now a high priority. Urgent action is required to ensure that all children will be able to return to school and get the support they need to recover from the multiple consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and be better prepared for future shocks.

To ensure that every child has the opportunity to grow, learn and thrive, a group of member states, with support of WFP, have launched a global School Meals Coalition. This coalition brings together governments, United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and research institutions to drive actions that can urgently re-establish, improve and scale-up school meals programmes in low, lower middle, upper middle and high income countries around the world.

WFP's work on School Feeding

WFP has six decades of experience supporting school feeding and a trajectory of working with more than 100 countries to set up sustainable national school feeding programmes. In 2020, WFP provided meals, snacks or take-home rations in the form of food or cash-based transfers to 15 million children in 74 countries, of which 50 per cent were girls.

In response to school closures due to COVID-19 WFP rapidly switched from on-site feeding programmes to provide almost 7 million vulnerable children and their families (in 43 countries) with dry take-home rations – often distributed as family rations – cash or vouchers. These transfers provided a safety net for vulnerable families during COVID-19 lockdowns and an incentive for families to send their children back to school when they reopened.

School meals coverage 2020

