



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 intergenerational cycle of hunger and poverty that affects the world's most vulnerable areas, contributing to improving their livelihood prospects.

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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 39 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 2021, 6 million received school meals in humanitarian emergency settings affected by conflict or natural disasters.

Tackling multiple crises

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic the world faced the worst education crisis in a century. At the peak of the crisis in April 2020, 1.6 billion children around the world were impacted by school closures, while 370 million children missed their main meal at school.

Though by now the COVID-19 related restrictions have mostly eased off, children are returning to underfunded schools, coming from homes that are more food insecure and poorer than before. The currently unfolding food price crisis resulting from increased costs of food, fuel, and fertilizers is further threatening global food security and child wellbeing.

WFP estimates that the global food crisis has pushed an additional 23 million under-18s into acute food insecurity since the start of the year, taking the total of children now affected to 153 million. This represents nearly half of the 345 million people facing acute hunger.

School meal programmes are invaluable safety nets for the most vulnerable. By providing the potentially only nourishing meal of the day to vulnerable children, their health, education and well-being can be protected. The resilience of whole communities to crises can be increased if school feeding programmes are put in place and strengthened.

Given school meals' proven benefits across sectors, governments from the global North and South have joined forces and established an international School Meals Coalition. Launched at the Food Systems Summit in 2021 and supported by WFP, the School Meals Coalition aims at ensuring that every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy, nutritious daily meal in school by 2030. By September 2022, the Coalition counts more than 70 member countries and 70 partners, and 15 countries have made bold national commitments to achieve the Coalition's goals.

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 2021, WFP provided meals, snacks or take-home rations in the form of food or cash-based transfers to 15.5 million children in 78 countries, of which 49% per cent were girls.

In response to the effects of the global food and fuel price crisis, WFP is strengthening its school feeding operations in countries facing higher food and fuel costs to ensure that children receive healthy and nutritious meals in schools.

School meals coverage 2021

