We are living through the most profound education crisis in history, which will have consequences for generations to come. About 70 percent of 10-year-olds in low-income countries cannot read or write a simple sentence. Part of that is because, although we've been able to get more children into school, they are too sick or too hungry to learn. Today, about 300 million schoolchildren suffer from anaemia leading, on average, to a 6-point drop in IQ. About 73 million most vulnerable school-aged children in 60 low and lower-middle-income countries are still waiting to receive school meals.

School meals and school health and nutrition programmes can help to address our education and food system challenges, while also providing communities with stability and prosperity. School meals provide a social safety net to children (especially girls, refugees and IDPs), financial incentives to parents (freeing up funds for other essentials like health, shelter and food storage), better and more sustainable diets for children, women's empowerment through Home Grown School Feeding programmes, and they contribute to the stabilisation of local markets by creating jobs. These benefits help to strengthen weakened education and food systems and address food insecurity.

WHY WFP?
Working in partnership with governments, and with sufficient financing in place, WFP can help to establish and strengthen national school meals programmes that will contribute to multiple Sustainable Development Goals: address poverty (SDG1), hunger (SDG2), health and wellbeing (SDG3), education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), economic growth (SDG8), reduced inequality (SDG10) and global partnerships (SDG17).

WFP's technical and policy support has indirectly influenced the quality of life, access to education and nutritional status of 155 million schoolchildren in 74 countries. When necessary, and particularly in low-income or fragile environments, providing children with nutritious school meals can lift entire communities out of poverty and onto the road to sustainable development. When integrated into comprehensive school health and nutrition approaches, these programmes can provide safety nets that fuel and sustain educational opportunities, social protection, sustainable food systems, gender empowerment and economic growth.
contexts, WFP provides school meals to vulnerable children in support of national objectives. In 2021, WFP provided school meals to 15.5 million children in 57 countries.

MOVING FORWARD

Returns on school meals are truly impressive - up to US$9 on each dollar spent, because of their multisectoral returns. School meal programmes are at the very top of the list of “best buys” in development identified by the Copenhagen Consensus Exercise.

Enabling and supporting nationally owned sustainable programmes

In lower-middle income countries, we support governments (through their national policies, strategies, and sustainable finance) to transition to nationally owned and self-reliant programmes. In low-income countries and fragile contexts where meals are only available to about 20 percent of the children, and national capacity is lacking, WFP is working with the international community to ensure these programmes are scaled up to support the hardest-to-reach and most vulnerable children.

If we are to reach 73 million more children, we need to mobilize US$5.8 billion additional funding for government programmes.

Working across sectors

WFP support ensures that school meals have a wide range of benefits beyond education and nutrition - the agriculture sector can support women farmers to grow and sell food to schools, shorten value chains and improve the sustainability of production approaches; the health sector can support children, especially girls, by integrating measures like fortification to prevent anaemia, malaria control and vaccination; the social protection sector can make sure these programmes are embedded in the wider system.

Forging Global Partnerships

Led by France and Finland, a School Meals Coalition took shape at the UN Global Food Systems Summit in 2021 and with WFP’s help it has grown to 74 countries and 76 partner organizations. Members have pledged to repair struggling school nutrition programmes, reach 73 million students not receiving meals today, and strengthen the quality and efficiency of school feeding — all by 2030. In just one year, the School Meals Coalition has created unprecedented momentum and is showing impressive early results in the scale up of national programmes.

COUNTRY EXAMPLES

Rwanda went from covering 640,000 children two years ago, to 3.8 million children now, increasing domestic budget allocations for school feeding from US$8 million to 80 million. WFP has accompanied this process and helped the government design and roll out the national programme.

Honduras has revived the national school meals programme after two years of political instability. The government has just committed US$65 million of domestic resources to reach 1.3 million children, with the support of WFP.

Benin has now reached 75 percent of coverage of school meals funded with domestic resources. The government hopes to cover 100 percent of the children in the next two years. President Talon has committed US$270 million dollars of the national budget to implement the programme, which is run with the support of WFP.

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