

Providing children with nutritious meals at school is a critical component supporting both education and health. School meals have proven that they are both an investment in a prosperous future for children and their families, while at the same time providing a powerful platform for the development of entire communities.



## CHANGING LIVES



# School Based Programmes

Investing in Children and Communities through School Health and Nutrition



## THE CHALLENGE

The world is in the midst of a food crisis of unprecedented proportions, the largest in modern history with a record 333 million people across 78 countries facing acute food insecurity. Even before the pandemic, about 73 million of the most vulnerable school-aged children in 60 low and lower middle-income

countries did not receive school meals. Added to this, a [quarter of a billion children do not attend school](#) regularly.

Delivering school meals at scale can be an investment in a social protection tool that will provide a platform for the future development of whole communities, and the construction of stronger and more sustainable food systems.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

We must work in partnership with governments, providing the support they require to scale up and institutionalise their own school meals programmes.

Globally, about 99 percent of the costs of school meals programmes are borne by governments, highlighting how ubiquitous they are. But low and lower middle-income countries are struggling with scale, quality and fiscal space, which WFP and partners are supporting governments to address.

### Support national investment and capacity

In lower-middle income countries, where about 39 percent of school-aged children receive meals, we support governments to transition to nationally owned and self-reliant programmes. That means helping them to define their national policies, strategies, and sustainable finance (through national budgets) achieve full ownership, improve quality, and scale.

In low-income countries, and fragile contexts, where these programmes are most needed, meals are only available to about 18 percent of the children, which is unacceptable. While low-income governments have drastically increased

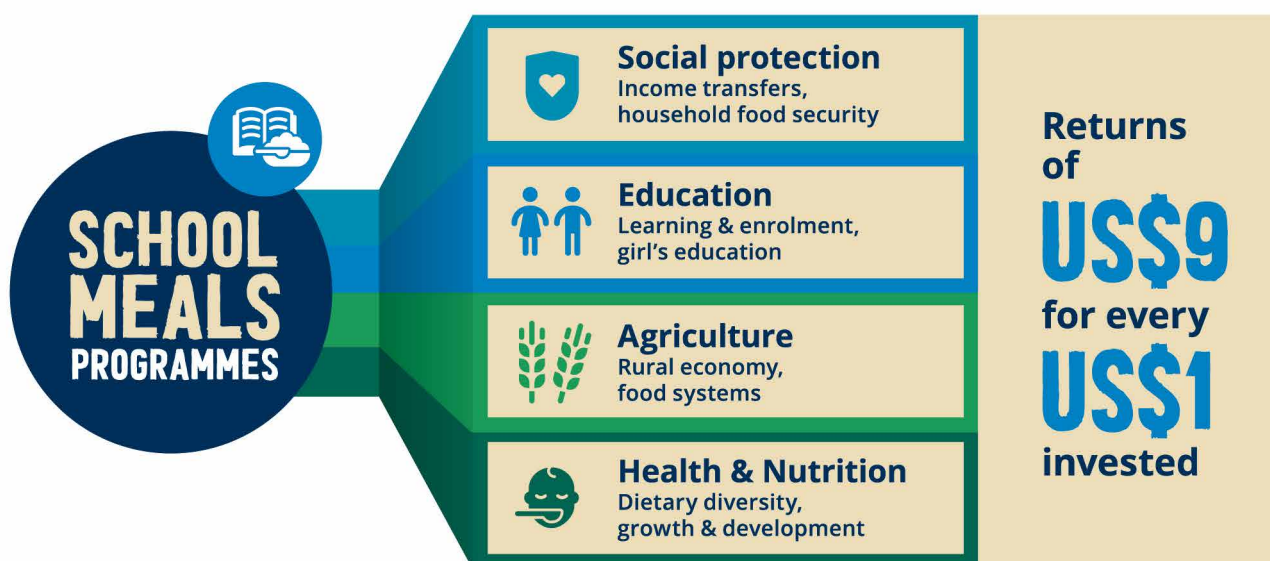
their financing of programmes by around 15 percent between 2020 and 2022, school meals coverage still remains around 4 percent below pre-pandemic levels. In these countries, where national budgets are strained and where government capacity is often weaker, we need a robust response from the international community to expand and sustain these programmes.

### Work across sectors to transform lives

The market impact of [school meal programmes has been measured at around US\\$48 billion](#) per year. Programmes that buy food locally create structured and predictable markets for [smallholder produce](#), reducing the economic risks small farmers face in investing in improved and diversified crops. The result is higher income, better food security, more diverse and sustainable diets, and more resilience in times of economic or climatic stress.

The impact of school meals on household budgets can be especially significant as many poor families pay up to 80 percent of income on food. The value of the school meals can reach 10 percent of a vulnerable family's income and, in effect, free up disposable income for more education, better shelter, farm equipment, fertilizer and food storage.

### School feeding achieves high returns on investment across at least four sectors: (i) social protection; (ii) education (iii) agriculture; and (iv) health and nutrition



Source: Adapted from Verguet et al, 2020

School meals also build up the nutrition and health of children, continuing investments made in the first 1,000 days to the next 7,000 days of a child's life. School meals programmes have been shown to [improve educational outcomes](#), increasing school enrolment by an average of 9%. A study in Malawi showed that school meals contribute to reducing the number of school days children missed due to sickness from 25 percent to 14 percent.

They can also support children's health by integrating measures like fortification to prevent anaemia, malaria control and vaccination.

School meals have also proved to be a game-changer when it comes to reducing the gender equality gap. They give poor families a powerful incentive to send and keep their daughters in school.

**For girls, a single year of secondary education equates to a 25 percent increase in wages later in life. A child born to a literate mother is 50 percent more likely to survive past the age of 5. And one extra year of schooling for girls reduces infant mortality rates by up to 10 percent.**

Through the home-grown school feeding programmes, family farms and catering businesses, often run by women, are integrated into the programmes and extend the benefits of school meals to whole communities. In Colombia, the school meals programme provides employment to about 76,000 women.

### **Create partnerships for impact – the School Meals Coalition**

The School Meals Coalition is led by Finland, France and Brazil and was launched in 2021. Now, with 98 government members and 115 partner organizations, the Coalition is an innovative, government-led network of action aiming to ensure every child receives a healthy and nutritious meal in school by 2030.

The Coalition works to help decision makers scale up their programmes and improve their quality through several initiatives including the Research Consortium for School Health

and Nutrition, based in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, which has created global Communities of Practice to provide government decision makers with the best available evidence on cost-effective programme design; the Sustainable Financing Initiative, led by the Education Development Centre, to help identify novel approaches to financing national programmes; and the Data and Monitoring Initiative, to track and evaluate the success of the recovery efforts.

In 2023, an additional initiative was launched: Cities Feeding the Future, led by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which connects municipalities of over 200 cities from the global North and South to exchange best practices and join advocacy efforts around school meals.

### **WHY WFP?**

WFP is the lead agency supporting governments with school meals and school health and nutrition programmes. In 2022, the organization made school meals its flagship area of work, which meant increased investment and support to governments in a comprehensive way. "[A Chance for every Schoolchild - WFP School Feeding Strategy 2020 – 2030](#)" lays out WFP's vision of working with governments and partners to jointly ensure that all primary schoolchildren have access to good quality meals in schools, accompanied by a broader integrated package of health and nutrition services.

### **Currently, WFP has three main roles in the global school meals agenda:**

1. **Support governments to establish, strengthen and consolidate their school meals programmes:** WFP provides policy support, technical assistance, evidence, and know-how to help middle, lower middle- and low-income governments establish or strengthen the sustainability of their school feeding programmes. WFP's technical and policy support has indirectly influenced the quality of life, access to education and nutritional status of 107 million schoolchildren in 77 countries.



2. **Operational support to countries:** when necessary, and particularly in low-income or fragile contexts, WFP provides school meals to vulnerable children in support of national objectives. In 2022, WFP provided school meals to more than 20 million children in 59 countries, around 9.6 million of these children were in emergency contexts or crises, with about 72 percent of the coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

3. **WFP is the global knowledge holder and coordinator of three public goods:**

- **The School Meals Coalition:** As the Secretariat of the Coalition, WFP supports countries of all income levels to share experiences, access financing, and improve their approaches, supported by a global network of partner organizations. WFP helps all partners of the Coalition to coordinate action and

connect with the initiatives, which it has helped to incubate and launch.

- **The State of School Feeding Worldwide:** a publication issued every two years that provides quantitative and qualitative information on the state of this policy area globally. The publication also monitors the progress of the School Meals Coalition and achievements towards the goals of improving school health and nutrition.
- **The Global School Meals Database:** WFP is establishing a global database of school meals indicators that will be available to all countries and partners, to track progress annually.

WFP's planned budget in the school meals area is about US\$1.5 billion annually, making it one of the largest contributors to education and social protection efforts in low-income countries.

The infographic consists of three panels. The first panel on the left has a blue background and features two stylized human figures in white. To their right, the text reads '73M VULNERABLE primary school aged CHILDREN ARE IN NEED OF SCHOOL MEALS'. The middle panel has a dark blue background and features a white icon of a plate with a fork and knife. To its left, the text reads '418 M CHILDREN RECEIVED SCHOOL MEALS in 2022'. The third panel on the right has a teal background and features a white icon of a dollar sign with a curved arrow pointing to the right. To its left, the text reads 'EVERY US\$1 invested in SCHOOL MEALS HAS A US\$9 RETURN ON INVESTMENT'.

