

State of School Feeding in Latin America and the Caribbean

2022



Foreword

School feeding programs, along with other social protection initiatives, provide access to better diets for school children, support children's long-term well-being, and help them to learn and thrive. They play a critical role in encouraging children to go to school. Once in the classroom, school meals ensure children are well nourished and ready to learn.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the education of 165 million students in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Prolonged school closures significantly affected human capital in

the region, disrupting learning and academic performance, and removing children from school meals and health and nutrition interventions, causing an educational crisis that now continues against a backdrop of compounding challenges in the region, including the pandemic's long-tail economic and social effects.

Now that schools have reopened across the region, integrated approaches to support children's health, nutrition and wellbeing are needed to safeguard their development and put them back on track in their schooling.



It only takes a couple of hours for children to start to feel hungry. Teachers know what hunger looks like in the classroom: fidgeting, attention spans shortening, stomachs growling – both teaching and learning get more difficult. For kids who came to school hungry, it's even harder for them to concentrate and to learn.

This publication, the State of School Feeding in LAC, looks at the state of school meals in the region today. It assesses, for the first time, the impact that COVID-19 and a multi-layered crisis have had on schoolchildren and on school-based food and nutrition programs in the region. National school meals programs in LAC have arguably made the most progress globally (while recognizing the progress of individual countries

elsewhere), and so the insights gained in LAC have implications for programs worldwide. The report highlights what has been done to overcome the unprecedented challenges in the region and – critically – identifies the key principles that underpin successful school feeding programs as governments bolster their education systems for the future.

The report showcases governments' achievements and the work of partnerships including the global School Meals Coalition to overcome the negative effects of the pandemic and ensure children across the region realize their full potential. The World Food Programme and the Inter-American Development Bank are fully committed to supporting these critical efforts. Together, we will succeed in giving every child, the opportunity to enjoy a nutritious school meal and the chance to learn, grow and thrive.



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Executive Summary

Introduction

This joint publication by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Food Programme (WFP) is the first regional *State of School Meals in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Its release comes at a crucial time for the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the education of 165 million students in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Many countries in the region successfully adapted and scaled up their national school feeding programmes during the pandemic – even using them to reach additional vulnerable people – again proving how crucial these programmes are as part of national education and social protection systems. But the longtail effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the prolonged closure of schools, still damaged multiple aspects of children’s well-being (Abizanda et al., 2022; Schady et al., 2023). Most fundamentally, closures disrupted learning and academic performance causing an educational crisis, which is now continuing against a backdrop of compounding crises in the region. Food and agricultural input prices are rising as is food insecurity and nutritional indicators are in decline across the region (ECLAC, FAO and WFP, 2022; FAO et al., 2023c). Longstanding structural challenges continue: a changing climate alongside intensified droughts and wildfires and more frequent and violent hurricanes, rising trends in overweight and obesity along with their associated comorbidities, and complicated and largescale migratory movements, all of which threaten children’s wellbeing, access to school, and ability to thrive.

These compounding challenges create the conditions for millions of children in the region to be at risk of dropping out of school. This publication presents data that up to 12 million children, adolescents, and youth of primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary age are already out of school in LAC. The educational journey of over 118 million boys and girls between the ages of four and 17 is estimated to be in jeopardy (IDB, 2023). Their access to quality education is uncertain, and this poses a significant threat to their academic progress and future opportunities.

In this context, school meals programmes – especially those that are provided alongside health and nutrition investments – stand out as a fundamental tool to improve the general well-being of school-age children, and to promote education and sustainable development in the region. In addition to contributing to students’ daily nutrition, school meals can contribute to reducing social and economic inequality gaps, promoting equitable access to quality education and healthy diets. However, school feeding programmes in the region face significant challenges in their implementation due to problems in management, funding, and coordination.

This publication aims to use the best available data sources to describe the state of school feeding the region, the scale and coverage of programmes, their key programmatic components, and their impact on schoolchildren and their communities. It draws on the WFP State of School Feeding Worldwide publication series from 2013, 2020 and 2022 in methodology and approach as well as on the latest published evidence available on school meals in the region. This publication complements the global report, *The State of School Feeding 2022*, by focusing specifically on the needs, culture, and context of LAC. It reports on the specific survey results for Latin American and the Caribbean, and analyses them in the regional context, presenting five chapters on the state of school feeding in LAC in key areas. The publication aims to inform decision-making and the implementation of effective public policies to promote the well-being and development of future generations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Main findings



School meals programmes in LAC continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting to school closures and new safety measures, mainly changing to take-home rations. Today, school meals programmes are back in schools across the region.

This publication finds that 80.3 million children received school meals, such as breakfast, snacks, or lunch, across Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022. Most of these children live in South America (63.2 million), followed by Central America (13.3 million), and the Caribbean (3.8 million).

Map 1.1

Children receiving school meals in Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: Own elaboration using publicly accessible, official sources including from the 2019 and 2021 Global Survey of School Meal Programs of the Global Child Nutrition Foundation, IDB, UNESCO, the World Bank, and WFP.



Political commitment and investments in school meals national programmes remain high, despite the crisis.

Most LAC countries have established legal and policy frameworks. At least 19 countries in the region have either a specific school feeding or school nutrition policy or law (Cruz 2020; WFP 2017c). School meals programmes are to a lesser extent framed in multisectoral policies that include the social protection, health, and agriculture sectors.

Most laws and policies developed over the past decade have proven to be more sensitive to school nutrition and to local food systems (FAO et al., 2023), but countries still need to further strengthen regulatory frameworks and implementation to purchase local food. LAC countries have been at the forefront of adopting policies to purchase food from local smallholder farmers. Brazil has been a pioneer in this field, linking family farmers with school feeding programmes and allocating a minimum of 30 percent of food procurement budgets to direct purchasing from small farmers. Other countries in the region, such as Guatemala and Haiti, are also increasing local purchases from small farmers and strengthening links between schools and local food systems. Available information suggests that local purchases benefit schoolchildren and farmers and communities at large. However, the lack of evidence on the effects of local purchases on children's diets, on farmers' socio-economic development and on women and Indigenous Peoples producers, limits our capacity to quantify these benefits. Nearly all countries require further scaling up to reach the full potential of local purchase.

National budgets are the major source of funding in all middle-income countries. The estimated regional investment in school meals in 2022 was between US\$3.6 (reported) and US\$7.6 billion (estimated). Based on data across 21 countries, domestic budgets make up 99 percent of funds for school meals programmes in most countries. National budgets were the major source of funding for countries in all income levels; in lower middle-income countries, four percent of the budget comes from other national donors and private sector, and six percent come from international donors. Comparable data for low-income countries is not available.

Governments in the region continue to build on a long history of regional and international cooperation. South-South and triangular cooperation and regional networks such as the RedRAES network and regional initiatives continue to fuel exchanges across the region. Seventeen countries have joined the School Meal Coalition in less than two years, showing political will to ensure progress on national plans and commitments.



However, inequalities remain between countries with more and fewer resources, and within countries in terms of the programmes' reach, relevance, and quality.

In the region, most national school feeding programs are universal by design (WFP, 2017c), but in practice do not reach full coverage. Coverage was calculated for this publication for twenty countries by dividing the number of children reported to receive school meals in primary schools, by the number of children enrolled in primary schools as reported by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021). Eight out of twenty countries (40 percent) in the region have one hundred percent coverage, compared to four (20 percent) with coverage between seventy and 99 percent, four (20 percent) with coverage between 50 and 69 percent, and four (20 percent) with coverage under 50 percent. Brazil, the largest programme in the region, has a coverage of 100 percent.

Coverage should also be understood in relationship to financial constraints, which can require trade-offs that affect programme quality. For example, some programmes reach more schools but with a less nutritious-food basket. Some programmes reach all schools but provide meals for fewer days than children are expected to attend school. Though most programmes in the region have objectives that seek to improve health and nutrition, only four report delivering a fully integrated package of at least six health or nutrition interventions in conjunction with school meals. Especially in times of increasing food prices and cost of living (ECLAC et al., 2022), universal coverage of quality programming is key to protecting and promoting the physical, emotional, and social development, health, and wellbeing of schoolchildren.

This publication finds that in low-income countries, the cost of school feeding is as low as US\$10 per year per child, whereas in high-income countries, the annual cost per child is estimated at US\$293. Programme quality is highly dependent on funding, which can affect, for example, the quantity, quality and diversity of the food provided, or whether health and nutrition components are integrated with school meals.

Adequate investment is needed also in local food systems, in all their diversity. Few school meals programmes in the region actively aim to support Indigenous Peoples' food systems, by including cultural practices, culinary traditions, and preservation of Indigenous knowledge in programming, purchasing foods from Indigenous farmers, and ensuring leadership of Indigenous authorities and participation of communities. Select programmes are innovating to embrace the benefits of an intercultural approach, such as Colombia's school feeding programme for Indigenous Peoples, which involves Indigenous and traditional authorities in decision-making and promotes local production and purchasing. Brazil's National School Feeding Programme implemented guidelines to meet the socio-economic vulnerabilities and cultural specificities of Indigenous Peoples, having a positive effect on local economies and reducing environmental costs. Yet, most programmes in the region have yet to reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities and interculturalism.



The challenge now is for governments to reach the most vulnerable kids with quality, integrated programs that are resilient to shocks, and that will help kids get back on track after the pandemic.

Quality, integrated programming is urgently needed. The prevalence and coexistence of undernutrition, overweight and obesity, micronutrient deficiencies, and food insecurity in the region requires adequate investment, evidence and programme learning on what works to support healthy nutrition for schoolchildren. A 2019 study in Peru found that breakfast provided through the Qali Warma School Feeding Programme had positive and significant short-term effects on cognitive test performance among children who did not eat breakfast at home, especially in areas belonging to the lowest economic quintiles (MIDIS, 2019). Multi-sectoral activities in schools, particularly health and nutrition interventions, help deepen the scope and impact of school meals (Bundy et al., 2018). Local purchases are another way to benefit children's nutrition by providing them with fresh and nutritious food, diversifying diets, and improving local food environments. Providing nutrition education and other curriculum-related interventions such as school gardens can further build kids' healthy relationships with food.

The investments made in school meals lead to returns for the economy and human capital in the region. Well-designed, intersectoral programmes that purchase locally could reach a return of up to US\$9.00 (WFP, 2022b; Verguet et al., 2020).

For school meals to deliver on their potential, countries will need to strengthen institutional and regulatory frameworks, address the gender gap, mobilize adequate resources, and ensure multisectoral approaches, at a minimum. Programmes can improve by changing over to more agile and accountable management systems, monitoring and evaluating to improve programme quality, and innovating and digitalizing.

School feeding programmes in the region have shown resilience and adaptability during crisis situations as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, beyond the pandemic, school feeding has been sparingly used to provide support during different kinds of shocks, such as natural disasters, food price increases, inflationary shocks, and large migratory inflows. Nicaragua, Honduras, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Haiti are examples of countries that have used school feeding programmes to provide additional assistance to school children – and sometimes their communities. However, school meals programmes need to invest in their preparedness to respond to crises, including climate crises, because they are one of the main social protection platforms with extensive capacity to support vulnerable populations in the region. Likewise, they need to invest in their own institutional resilience to ensure continuity of quality, school meals programmes to protect and promote the physical, emotional, and social development, health and well-being of students and the school community.



The way forward

Given these findings, the publication presents the way forward according to its chapter structure. First, we draw out the way forward for school feeding programmes in LAC: their scale, coverage, and key elements. Then, we consider partnerships in LAC and set out the opportunities available to the region. Third, we consider how to promote the integration of school meals programmes to accelerate nutrition, human, social and economic development in LAC. Fourth, we recommend how to better link local food systems and schools. Fifth, we draw on our findings on school meals in times of crisis to describe how programmes can be more resilient to shocks and support their students and communities when crises arise. Lastly, in our Special Report we draw out the way forward for intercultural approaches to school meals.

Chapter 1 School feeding programmes in LAC in 2022: Scale, coverage, and key elements

Inequalities between countries with more and fewer resources are stark, with the annual cost of school feeding per child is as low as US\$10 in low-income countries in the region, whereas in high-income countries in the region, the annual cost per child is estimated at US\$293. Coverage ranges from 30 to 100 percent across the countries in the region.

- Continued and increased investment in school meals programmes is needed to keep children in school during this precarious time, post-pandemic time, as learning losses continue to threaten retention in the near future.
- Full coverage of quality programming is key to protect and promote the physical, emotional, and social development, health, and wellbeing of schoolchildren, which cannot be allowed to be undercut in quality or reach by rising prices amidst rising needs.
- Integrated approaches to health and nutrition in schools are required, and nearly all countries in the region can improve the integrated package of interventions on offer to meet the needs of the learner.

Chapter 2 Partnerships in school feeding in LAC

Governments in the region can build on a long history of regional and international cooperation. They can take advantage of the expanding School Meals Coalition and its tools and initiatives in addition to longstanding regional networks, projects, and relationships to accelerate progress towards larger, better, and stronger school feeding programmes.

- Continued exchanges and projects within the region – and globally – are needed to continuously improve and innovate programmes.
- Strengthening regional networks can help exchange information, innovation, and evidence to increase coverage, improve school feeding programmes, and implement policies. Sharing evidence and experience can strengthen programmes around key issues: local purchase from smallholder farmers, Indigenous Peoples' food systems, healthy school environments, promoting healthy diets, climate change and school meals, food and nutrition education, social and community participation, infrastructure improvement, interinstitutional and intersectoral participation, and other technical areas.
- Continuing to expand School Meals Coalition membership in the region will allow the great experience of LAC school feeding programs to inform the global discussion while putting the Coalition's tools and initiatives at the service of member countries. Embedding it into the regional ecosystem of school feeding platforms and networks will strengthen not only opportunities for research and exchange in the region, but also for sharing the skills and practices from LAC in global fora and networks, including the School Meals Coalition, and especially its Research Consortium.
- Partners and governments should generate, promote, and participate in discussion spaces, such as global, regional, and sub-regional events and forums, which contribute to highlight this area and strengthening of national school feeding programmes in the region. Stakeholders should use regional and global platforms for partnerships, learning, advocacy, and visibility of regional efforts.
- Stakeholders need to generate better evidence, looking at under-researched areas and generating data and evidence to inform stronger policies and programmes and make better investments.
- Governments, professionals, experts, partners, academia, civil society, and international organizations can actively contribute to the strengthening and sustainability of school meals programmes that respond to their respective national objectives.

Chapter 3 Advancing the integration of school meals programmes to accelerate improved nutrition, human, social and economic development in LAC

Although most governments offer school meals together with some complementary health and nutrition interventions, there is an urgent need to ensure integrated packages that meet all the health and nutrition needs of children so that they can learn and thrive. Few countries invest adequately in integrated health and nutrition packages, with sufficient multisectoral investment, for example, in health interventions that have been shown to support children's well-being and academic achievement. This investment is even more necessary now, after the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of health and nutrition services experienced by children.

- School feeding policies should highlight their contributions to educational objectives and should ensure that multisectoral packages are provided that support children to achieve academically.
- Most programmes still have great potential to maximize their benefits by becoming more sensitive to addressing malnutrition in all its forms. By establishing clear programmatic objectives and robust monitoring and evaluation systems, the region can better gauge the impact of interventions to make progress against malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The triple burden of malnutrition – stunting, obesity and overweight, and micronutrient deficiencies – requires specific targets and evidence-based programmes of proven impact for its prevention.
- Investing in the future human capital of the region requires guaranteeing healthy school meals and school environments and using this platform as a springboard for comprehensive health in schools.
- Aware of the importance of healthy diets based on sustainable food systems, various countries have undertaken the task of developing specific dietary guidelines. As other countries in the region join this initiative, it is vital to promote adherence of school meals programmes to these guidelines.



Chapter 4 Home-grown school feeding in Latin America and the Caribbean: Linking food systems and schools

Available evidence suggests that home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programmes can benefit local food systems, smallholder farmers, and communities, while fostering better lifelong food habits among schoolchildren and their families. However, several challenges and opportunities are to be addressed for these initiatives to maximize their impact, scale up and be sustainable, efficient, and effective over time.

- Investing in evidence generation and advocacy efforts is needed. A lack of strong quantitative evidence is still a barrier to measure the impact of HGSF on both local food systems and schoolchildren's health and nutrition. Quantifying these benefits is key to inform policy and programmatic improvements that are needed to achieve higher quality, greater nutrition-sensitiveness, and cost-efficiency, and to support the advocacy efforts necessary to increase funding and achieve greater sustainability. Through the School Meal Coalition and its Research Consortium, LAC stakeholders can share their experiences to consolidate worldwide information gaps.
- Stronger monitoring, evaluation, and reporting systems are required comprising of indicators that are specific to HGSF and are integrated within national systems, and that can track local purchases, measure impacts, identify barriers, and inform decision-making processes.
- Multisectoral coordination should be fostered and HGSF approaches should be embedded within wither national food systems policies. Countries should continue to adapt their legal and institutional frameworks in favour of these interventions, setting up multisectoral coordination, and expanding approaches that have proven to be successful.
- Partners should continue to invest in building stronger regional communities of practice, promoting exchange on lessons learned and best practices on HGSF, including through regional and global platforms and community of practices, such as the School Meals Coalition, as well as through South-South and triangular exchanges.
- Local producers should be better supported and their access to institutional markets improved, to be able to provide a steady supply of food even in times of crisis and in areas that are vulnerable to different types of shocks. Support should be institutional, ensuring that legal frameworks and public procurement processes are inclusive and allow purchases from smallholder producers, and it should be technical, helping farmers to access the needed inputs, as well as credit, information, and technical and organizational skills.
- HGSF efforts should be complemented with interventions devoted to developing healthier school food environments and fostering behaviour change. To impact the health and nutrition of schoolchildren and their families, and to generate better and more nutritious lifelong food habits, HGSF models need to be complemented with interventions that foster capacity strengthening and behaviour change in a sustainable way. Providing nutritious meals, including through the implementation of national food based dietary guidelines, investing in complementary school-based health and nutrition interventions, such as social and behaviour change communication (SBCC), campaigns and education initiatives can multiply the effects of HGSF initiatives on schoolchildren and their families.
- HGSF efforts should maximize benefits for women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and Afro-descendants. School meals programmes offer a number of opportunities to increase and consolidate the participation of women farmers as well as youth and Indigenous producers in the school value chain. While evidence is scarce and more analysis is needed to shed light on this area, lessons learned so far show that opportunities for women and Indigenous producers to become suppliers of national school feeding programmes are largely untapped.

Chapter 5 School feeding programmes in times of crisis

Although each programme should design its preparedness and response strategies according to its own objectives, capacities, and risk scenarios, some generic proposals are presented here. These proposals arise from the experiences shared in the chapter, as well as in the global literature on shock-responsive social protection. They require appropriate budget lines, as well as contingent financing mechanisms for times of crisis.

- Preparation is required to both guarantee operational continuity and to respond to new needs in times of crisis. Programmes should develop contingency plans and alternative mechanisms for contracting, delivering and preparing food in crises situations. These should include protective strategies and protocols for local purchase, to avoid shortages, price increases, and negative effects on local producers.
- To guarantee the operational continuity of the programmes, contingency protocols, alternative modalities and even adequate contractual clauses with providers and operators and budget adjustment mechanisms are needed, among others.
- Consider school meals for their capacity to provide additional assistance to schoolchildren (vertical expansion) during crisis. Additional response may mean providing snacks, food, or complementary services that meet food, nutritional, and other needs that arise because of the emergency.
- Assisting the non-school population (horizontal expansion), is a priori more difficult than vertical expansion, but the region already has successful experiences. The response to the non-school population may consist of rations to take home, meals in the schools themselves, or assistance through other programmes, for example, by temporarily transferring food stocks to humanitarian responses that assist the non-school population. Horizontal expansions also entail the need to develop a targeting mechanism to ensure that assistance reaches those most affected by the crisis.
- The school feeding response should be designed as part of a comprehensive strategy that includes other social protection programmes and the civil protection/disaster response system, among others, depending on the nature of the crisis. This alignment can range from the complementarity of the interventions (for example, division of geographic areas, population groups, types of assistance, among the different responses), to sharing information, human resources, etc.
- Emergency responses should be used to promote a transition to regular social protection. Sometimes crises make it possible to identify and reach people who are eligible for different social protection programmes – including school meals – but who are excluded. The emergency can be used as an opportunity to expand the coverage of regular programmes and reduce exclusion errors.
- Across the region, mechanisms to monitor food prices, access to healthy diets, and food and nutritional insecurity should be strengthened. The lack of integration with sectors that have such information is a huge barrier to making school feeding programmes effective.

Special Report Towards an intercultural approach to school meals in the region

Although there are several challenges, and positive experiences remain limited, the region is taking steps towards an intercultural approach to school meals. School-based programmes can serve as platforms and entry points to address broader issues regarding the right to self-development, food, and identity. A differentiated approach is the path to achieve intercultural school meals, yet more sensitization is needed across the region from the policy level to the design and implementation of the programmes with the active engagement of Indigenous Peoples and communities.

- Menus that incorporate Indigenous Peoples' foods and food traditions have a place in school meals.
- Diverse menus should be accompanied by dialogue and the participation of Indigenous Peoples, including the purchase of local products from communities.
- Providing conditions for intercultural approaches in multicultural settings is key, seeking opportunities to revitalize Indigenous Peoples' foods and cultures also in peri-urban and urban schools.
- Enabling processes are needed that contribute to intercultural societies that a) abide by the principles of providing healthy, nutritious food produced locally (all or in part), b) encourage sustainable food systems for the local economy, and c) promote participation in decision making.
- Stakeholders should influence more inclusive and intercultural policies through global and regional processes that raise awareness and work in partnership with governments, Indigenous Peoples' organisations, and various partners and stakeholders to promote and support Indigenous-sensitive programming.



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In collaboration with:



State of School Feeding in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022

This joint publication by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Food Programme (WFP) presents the state of school feeding programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) as of 2022. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and compounding challenges, the publication highlights the critical role of school feeding programs for the region.

The publication offers comprehensive insights into the state of school feeding in LAC: scale, coverage, components, and impacts. It emphasizes the need to reach vulnerable children to prevent dropouts and promote holistic development. The publication emphasizes the importance of integrating health and nutrition interventions along with school meals programmes via multisectoral approaches.

Key findings indicate that 80.3 million children across the region received school meals in 2022. Political commitment and investment in these initiatives is high with at least 19 countries having either a specific school feeding or school nutrition policy or law. Coverage ranges from 30 to 100 percent across the countries in the region. The publication recommends strengthening coverage and programme quality as well as regulatory frameworks, implementing local food procurement, investing in intercultural approaches, and enhancing multisectoral collaboration and partnerships. Moreover, it underscores the significance of crisis preparedness for school feeding programs, which were proven to be resilient – and indispensable – during the pandemic.

The publication offers specific recommendations to support countries to effectively tackle challenges and ensure that school feeding programs continue to contribute to children's development, education, and overall wellbeing.

