

SPECIAL REPORT

Towards an intercultural approach to school meals in the region

Excerpt from the State of School Feeding in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022



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Background

The joint publication by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Food Programme (WFP), the *State of School Meals in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022*, includes a Special Report: Towards an intercultural approach to school feeding in the region. It follows here as a stand-alone product, providing a regional overview of intercultural approaches to school meals, identifying challenges, and building on best practices in the region.

This excerpt provides easy access to this important topic: the way forward for intercultural approaches to school meals that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples' communities.

The full publication is available online at:

<https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-latin-america-and-caribbean-2022>

Acknowledgements

The authors for this publication's Special Report, *Towards an Intercultural Approach to School Meals in the Region* are Alejandra Pero, WFP's Global Indigenous Peoples Advisor, Dr. Francisco Rosado May, and Dr. Tania Eulalia Martinez- Cruz of the Coalition on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems. The IDB and the WFP acknowledge that these authors provided not only their time, expertise, and commitment but also their flexibility and understanding to this joint project, which culminated in the important contributions of this Special Report to the publication. We especially thank these authors for their work and collaboration.

1. Context

Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) number around 58.2 million (FAO, 2021). They live in the highlands and lowlands across the region and can be found in both geographically remote and urban areas. It is a population made up of 826 culturally diverse peoples speaking over 500 languages.¹

Indigenous Peoples often reside in areas rich in biodiversity and possess knowledge preserved for generations. Yet, as noted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), despite their cultural richness, they are 2.7 times more likely to live in extreme poverty than their non-Indigenous counterparts.² In Guatemala, for example, multidimensional poverty among Indigenous Peoples is registered at 80 percent compared to 50.1 percent among the non-Indigenous populations (MIDES and OPHI, 2018). Poverty also has a gender dimension. In Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, 34 percent of Indigenous women live in a condition of poverty compared to 26 percent of non-Indigenous women (OIT, 2022).

Poverty is the major distal determinant of stunting (Black et al., 2013). In countries like Ecuador, stunting prevalence is nearly twice as high for Indigenous children below the age of five than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Indigenous Peoples' children are also more likely to suffer micronutrient deficiency (vitamins and minerals) than non-Indigenous children (Palma, 2018). This situation is compounded by the high cost of food in the region. As per the United Nation Regional Panorama 2023, LAC is the region of the world with the most expensive healthy diet, which particularly affects Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants, who allocate a greater percentage of their income to the purchase of food (FAO et al., 2023b).



¹ Data can vary depending on source, methodology, year, number of countries covered, and other variables.

² *Gender and Diversity: Indigenous Peoples*. Retrieved 28 July 2023 from <https://www.iadb.org/en/gender-and-diversity/indigenous-peoples>.

Finally, educational gaps must also be noted as they are higher among Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean – almost 32 percent of Indigenous adults in employment have no formal education, compared to 13 percent of non-Indigenous adults (ILO, 2020).

A school meals programme is a strategy to address inequalities and to ensure Indigenous Peoples' children attend and stay in school while also meeting some of their nutritional needs. Across the region Indigenous Peoples' communities tend to benefit from school feeding programming. Poverty indicators are often used to identify areas to target which are likely to coincide with those where Indigenous Peoples live, such as in Mexico and Peru.

This Special Report explores how the concept of interculturalism is being integrated in school meals programming (Box 1). This includes inquiries into local purchase, Indigenous Peoples' participation in decision-making at local levels, culturally adapted menus, and enabling legal frameworks. However, it is not a comprehensive review. Although this report recognizes the diversity of cultures within the region, and the existing opportunities for inclusive approaches that address Afro-descendant communities and migrating children, it focuses on programming in Indigenous Peoples' communities. The analysis has drawn on available literature, interviews with government actors leading school meals programmes, and various partners with knowledge on the topic. It considers that prioritizing a culturally adequate diet is a way of supporting Indigenous Peoples in a meaningful way that fully respects their right to food³ and self-determination⁴ by ensuring they participate and are involved in decision-making.

Box 1

Definition of interculturalism for this publication

Interculturalism is the result of a process that includes a continuous interaction, communication, and learning amongst people and communities, valuing different traditions, aiming at building mutual respect, and providing conditions for the individual and community to develop capacities beyond their cultural or socioeconomic differences. It is also the result of a process that takes place in a safe environment, in which different cosmogonies and cultures coexist, enabling the conditions for the recuperation of knowledge and diets related to Indigenous Peoples' food systems and respect for the environment.⁵

³ The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent, and unrestricted access – either directly or by means of financial purchases – to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual, and collective, fulfilling, and dignified life free of fear. *About the right to food and human rights: Special Rapporteur on the right to food*. Retrieved 28 July 2023 from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-food/about-right-food-and-human-rights>.

⁴ The United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples includes rights to self-determination and to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

⁵ The first part of this definition is based on a collection of definitions that exist from national policies, the *Red de seguimiento, evaluación y sistematización LAC* (ReLAC, 2021). The second part was developed by the authors of this Special Report.

2. Approaches to school feeding: from centralized to differentiated programming

Central approaches to school feeding have given way to more decentralised ones, or to more differentiated programming for Indigenous Peoples, such as in Brazil through its *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* and Colombia's *Programa de Alimentación Escolar - PAE para-Pueblos Indígenas*. Centralised programming, which procures goods at central level and distributes uniformly across the country, tends to incorporate fewer local participatory processes and purchase less local, fresh, or traditional⁶ foods, all of which are key to more differentiated approaches. Differentiated approaches consider Indigenous Peoples' cultural uniqueness, food preferences, habits, and governance practices, as well as unique logistical challenges in remote areas such as the Amazon, where food items must be brought by boat or plane.

One example of differentiated programming is Colombia's 2018 Resolution on technical guidelines for the school feeding programme for Indigenous Peoples (*Lineamientos técnico-administrativos, estándares y condiciones mínimas del Programa de Alimentación Escolar - PAE para-Pueblos Indígenas*), which has made room for Indigenous Peoples' collective approaches through specific programming in certain communities in Indigenous territories benefitting 390,000 children. The specialized programme works with the Indigenous and traditional authorities; and involves the design of an Indigenous Peoples' Plan which includes menus that are approved by the same authorities. The implementation of the plan is often through an *olla comunitaria* or community pot.⁷ Colombia's programming is couched in a perspective of rescuing cultural and ancestral traditions and incentivizing local production and purchasing.

In this review, decentralised school meals programmes refer to how national governments disburse funds to states or departments to implement programming. For example, in Mexico the federal government designs policies that are adapted in each state, based on specific conditions. Furthermore, each state relies on each municipality to deliver the programme to schools. The federal government also provides indicators that are used at each level to determine the amount of funds allocated to each municipality. One of the most important indicators is poverty. In Guatemala, which also has a decentralised programme, funds are distributed directly from the Ministry of Education to the local volunteer-led parent organizations.

Decentralised approaches to school meals enable local decision-making, either at the school level or through the local or autonomous government. For example, in the case of Guatemala, the schools' volunteer parent-led organizations administer the funds provided by the state. In the case of Guatemala, US\$0.75 (75 cents) are provided per child. There, the parent-led organizations implement the meal scheme at the school from a list of proposed menus provided by the Ministry of Education that have been decided in consultation with nutritionists and representatives from urban and rural areas, yet not necessarily Indigenous Peoples. Nevertheless, the menus in Guatemala tend to incorporate local foods and use traditional ways of preparation (MINEDUC, 2020a; MINEDUC, 2020b). In some exemplary cases, school menu recipe books have been prepared in Indigenous languages using ancestral foods.

⁶ Traditional foods refer to preferred foods and/or ancestral foods – those foods prepared and consumed over generations from locally derived products.

⁷ A *community pot* brings people together to cook and eat from the same large pot. The community pot also represents an ancestral tradition based on the collective. The preparation of food is done for all and enables different sources of financing and contributions in kind by the community. See more: World Bank and UAPA, 2022.

These shifts to decentralised and differentiated approaches are also upheld through normative frameworks such as Bolivia's *Ley 622 de alimentación escolar en el marco de la soberanía alimentaria y la economía plural* that recognizes cultural diversity and the principles of *buen vivir*⁸, in addition to promoting local purchase to support family farming (Mercado et al., 2016).

Local purchase is a key component to differentiated programming. Brazil, for example, ensures its school meals programme use at least 30 percent of its resources to buy food locally (Bellinger and Andrade, 2016). In the state of Amazonas, with a large Indigenous population, the municipality of Gabriel da Cachoeira uses 100 percent of the funds to buy food locally (Case study 1). Indigenous Peoples' communities' remoteness to receive services reinforces the need to produce or generate the food locally, so it is not only more culturally adequate, but also economically and environmentally viable (Case study 1). Moreover, in Guatemala national guidelines indicate 70 percent of the food must be bought and produced locally to support family farming in the country.

3. What triggers a change in approach?

Implementing differentiated approaches to school meals programmes in multicultural⁹ regions is not an easy task. It demands a variety of practices, procedures, resources, public policies and an understanding of various cultures and their relationship to food. Across the LAC region, different factors have triggered these intentional approaches. For instance, in the case of Colombia, the change of approach stemmed from the need to promote the development of communities. Many of the actions in differentiated programming support local economies and promote the development of a community and/or area. Governments are also seeking ways to support sustainable food systems across the value and supply chain, to be resilient in a moment of crisis like that of the COVID-19 pandemic. From a human rights framework perspective, governments are also obliged as duty bearers to ensure no one is left behind no matter how small the population. In other cases, the food provided in school meals does not meet the expectations from a given culture (such as different tastes or habits), leading to waste and unmet goals regarding support to Indigenous children's development.



⁸ The concept of *buen vivir* is based on principles that recognize harmony between nature and human beings.

⁹ Areas with communities of people from different cultural backgrounds living in the same place (Rosado, 1996).

Case Study 1

School feeding in Indigenous Peoples' communities: The Indigenous PNAE in Amazonas

Context

Brazil's National School Feeding Programme, *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE)*, in 2019, fed over forty million children in the country for 200 days a year, making it one of the most well-established school meals programmes in Latin America. The federal government transfers funds to states, municipalities and schools according to the number of students enrolled. The Indigenous population of Brazil numbers approximately one million. They belong to 300 ethnicities distributed in 7,000 localities and are largely concentrated in the north and northeast regions of the country where there are some of the highest levels of poverty and social vulnerability. According to the most recent data from 2020-2022, the programme reached 178,300 elementary schools, 3,541 (1.9 percent) of which are in Indigenous Peoples' territories (INEP, 2023).

To respond to the socio-economic vulnerabilities and cultural specificities of its Indigenous Peoples, the PNAE set guidelines for school meals programs in 2017 and 2018. These include:

- School meal menus should meet Indigenous Peoples' community's needs, covering at least 30 percent of the nutritional and energy needs from a culturally adequate perspective while in part time schools in other regions, the culturally adequacy recommendation is 20 percent.¹⁰
- The per capita value for students enrolled in basic education schools located in Indigenous areas is R\$0.64 versus R\$0.36 in the rest of the schools.
- At least 30 percent of the funds used to buy food should be used to buy directly from smallholder farmers/Indigenous Peoples' locally. In bidding and procurement processes across the country, the Indigenous Peoples' food producers have preference, even in a city or school that is not located in Indigenous Peoples' territories.
- The National Fund for the Development of Education, or FNDE as per its acronym in Portuguese, recommends that states and municipalities with students enrolled in schools located in Indigenous areas should have at least one member representing Indigenous Peoples or communities in their School Feeding Councils.

Lack of implementation of state requirements sparks change:

In 2016 the Amazonas region, mostly accessible by boat or canoes, was not meeting the government requirements. Only 21 percent of Amazonian municipalities complied with the minimum obligation of purchases from smallholder farming in 2016 and 55 percent of the municipalities did not acquire food from local farmers or Indigenous Peoples.

In the same year, the Commission of Traditional Foods of the Peoples in Amazonas, a joint initiative of the federal, state, and municipal governments, Indigenous movements and leaders, traditional communities, and civil society organizations led by the Public Federal Ministry of Amazonas, was established to seek a solution to the challenges of 'adequate' food for Indigenous children.

¹⁰ Based on the higher level of food insecurity and overall malnutrition observed in Brazilian Indigenous children, the programme aims to cover more of their daily nutritional and caloric needs.

It found that:

1. Food sent to the region was often of poor quality, highly industrialized, and decontextualized from Indigenous Peoples' cultures.
2. Indigenous Peoples' food was not being purchased, despite being more nutritious and affordable because legislation at national level did not consider other forms of production and consumption.
3. Public managers were not aware of the regulations set by the PNAE.
4. Indigenous Peoples' needed training to be able to connect and access some policies and participate actively with PNAE.

Some of the actions taken during 2017 and 2018 to address these challenges were:

1. Training workshops for local actors on Indigenous school feeding.
2. Agreement on terms of commitment with local decision-makers.
3. Implementation of pilot projects with distinguished public calls of interest for Indigenous farmers.
4. Coordination with rural assistance agencies to issue the necessary documentation for Indigenous farmers to be able to participate in public purchases.
5. Formal recommendations for the public ministry to implement the legislation to municipal managers, highlighting that non-compliance may result in accountability to the municipality or state's executive manager.
6. Monitoring of public calls of interest and elaboration of a specific notice model for Indigenous Peoples.
7. Continuous monitoring and support of municipal public managers.

According to the PNAE, more than a third of the municipalities in the state of Amazonas made purchases and deliveries in Indigenous communities. This benefited 350 Indigenous families that produce food, 200 schools and 20,000 students with an expenditure of approximately US\$761,400.¹¹

In the community of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, the municipality with the largest Indigenous population in the country, sales from local smallholder farmers reached 100 percent of the amount the FNDE transferred to the municipality to execute the PNAE in 2020.

Lessons learned:

Involving Indigenous Peoples' and other actors can support and boost local economies, reducing environmental costs and overall expenditures. In 2020 a new National Technical Note¹² based on the experience of the Amazonas, regulation was established to scale up and replicate good practices in other states, expanding the right to self-consumption to the Indigenous Peoples and communities of Brazil and facilitating the supply of healthy food to all Brazilian elementary school students.

Source: WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger and FNDE. (2021). School Feeding in traditional communities: Policy Brief #4. The Indigenous PNAE in Amazonas. Available at <https://centrodeexcelencia.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PolicyBrief4-Indigena-EN.pdf>

¹¹ This case study uses the exchange rate of 1 Brazilian Real = US\$ 0.2538, the average for 2019.

¹² Ministério Público Federal, Procuradoria Geral da República, 6ª Câmara de Coordenação e Revisado – Populações Indígenas y Comunidades Tradicionais. Nota técnica No. 3/2020/6ªCCR/MPF.

4. Why is a differentiated and culturally appropriate approach important?

Differentiated approaches are critical because the foods Indigenous Peoples consume also have a cultural value in addition to a nutritional one, as foods are linked to territory and identity (Table 1). In many instances, their foods are also part of cultures, beliefs or are linked to specific celebrations or traditions. Non-culturally adequate diets can have a negative effect on Indigenous Peoples' health besides being a violation to their right to food in which adequacy (corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs) is an important element.

Not providing adequate diets causes changes in food habits and diets which can be detrimental to Indigenous Peoples (FAO and CINE, 2009) as it can lead to a reliance on market-based products which alienate them from their traditional¹³ food practices and knowledge systems that are essential for the sustainability of their territories and landscapes, their resilience, and the maintenance of their culture (Bellinger and Andrade, 2016; Girardi et al 2021). For example, a study among the North American Nuxalk Indigenous People indicates that Indigenous Peoples living in their territories and relying on traditional foods have a better health status as compared to their counterparts living in urban areas (Egeland et al., 2009; Kuhnlein and Chotiboriboon, 2022). Moreover, in Chile and Colombia, results indicate that implementing culturally adapted diets can help to reduce food waste by 30 percent (Sternadt, 2021).

Hence, not adapting school meals risks food waste, alienating children from their parents, elders, and community's tastes, which includes aromas, textures, colours, and practices. Moreover, it also leads to dependence on the market and highly processed foods, which undermines their nutritional status and health (Swensson et al., 2021). Nutrition objectives are not met, and economic resources are lost if the children do not consume appropriate and nutritious food.

Identifying Indigenous Peoples' foods that are nutrient rich can have a significant impact (Kuhnlein and Chotiboriboon, 2022). They can contribute to healthy diets (Kennedy et al., 2021), be absorbed into the local economy, can contribute to diversifying economies, and can substitute reliance on imported products thus stimulating local and self-development.

In some cases, school meals programs in the region include Indigenous foods and preparations. For example, in Peru, the national school meals program has included native potatoes in the food basket to promote the inclusion of local foods. In 2022, the *Qali Warma* national school meals programme distributed 411.89 tons of native potatoes during the school year, which were distributed to users of public educational institutions located in the Junín, Pasco, Huancavelica, and Cajamarca regions. In Guatemala, school meals include, for example: a typical broth, *caldo de Tobik*, which means broth of celebration and is also known by the name *made together by all*, in the municipality Totonicapán; *pinol*, a corn-based dish that has been declared part of Guatemala's cultural heritage and is a sign of the cultural identity of the Indigenous areas of San Juan Sacatepéquez, San Pedro Sacatepéquez, and Baja Verapaz; and the typical rice and beans with stewed chicken dish of the Garífuna culture. The official menus that include these foods also detail their preparation (MINEDUC, 2020a; MINEDUC, 2020b). In Colombia, the PAE Indígena includes Indigenous foods and preparations (World Bank and UAPA 2022).

¹³ Traditional refers to practices and knowledge developed by a people over generations based on observation and interaction with the natural environment of a specific area.

Table 1

Key elements in Indigenous Peoples' food systems

Indigenous Peoples' food systems: key features¹⁴	
<p>1. Cosmovision and the centrality of territory, where humans and nature are not separated. Indigenous Peoples' follow the natural cycles of their territory. Their territories are an essential part for their resilience and livelihoods. These practices enable sustainability.</p>	<p>2. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is the backbone of their food systems. It is embedded in their territory. Through adaptation and innovation, they know what to harvest according to the season, what to use for food and medicine. For example, Mayan Indigenous communities in the Yucatan use between 300-500 species of plants and animals (Toledo et al., 2008) for food, medicine, and energy.</p>
<p>3. Circularity is an essential part of the system through which waste is minimised. This is the case of an Éyujk community, which turned the foods used for a ceremony or ritual into meals for families for the whole week.</p>	<p>4. Social norms, values and governance structure that promote social capital and reciprocity within the community. Much of the Indigenous Peoples' resilience is grounded on their organisational structures, social capital, and moral economies. For example, during COVID-19 the World Bank surveyed 17 Indigenous communities and 70 percent reported they accessed food either through self-production or exchanges with other communities. Of these, five reported no food shortages or hunger in 2020 (Cord and Pizarro, 2021). Martínez-Cruz reports how solidarity and collective action supported the elders in a vulnerable situation during COVID-19 in an Indigenous community in Oaxaca, Mexico (2020).</p>

¹⁴ Adapted from Martínez-Cruz, TE and Rosado-May, F. (2022). Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems: Using Traditional Knowledge to Transform Unsustainable Practices. Religions for Peace and UNEP.

5. Challenges to successful differentiated programming

Despite greater openness and recognition of the significance of culturally adapted diets for school meals that support local farmers and Indigenous Peoples' traditional food systems, there are challenges.

Challenges in differentiated programming:

- Differentiated programming requires a multi-sectoral approach. Various government agencies should be involved in design and implementation, especially agriculture, education, health, gender, social protection/development and finance as well as autonomous authorities.
- Consultations with Indigenous Peoples and their governance structures require time, language skills, personnel who understand intercultural perspectives, and extra resources to enable those processes.
- Greater awareness is needed to understand the link foods have to identity, cultural traditions, and place (environment and geography) for Indigenous Peoples in addition to the nutritional value that Indigenous foods possess.
- Information needs to be translated into Indigenous Peoples' languages¹⁵ and made accessible to Indigenous Peoples' communities. WFP for example in Nicaragua is supporting the translation of national school feeding guidelines into Miskito and dialects of Mayangna.
- Dialogue is needed between Indigenous communities and national authorities to develop procedures so that the government's nutritional requirements are met while respecting the Indigenous Peoples' food cultures and cosmovisions.
- School meals programs often must meet dietary guidelines that are developed centrally; for differentiated programming to work, dietary guidelines can and should be made to align with Indigenous Peoples' food systems, and to reflect the nutritional content of biodiverse Indigenous foods.

Challenges in decentralised programming:

- The participation and increased engagement of Indigenous Peoples' community leaders and representatives of Indigenous Peoples' communities in public policy and design of normative frameworks remains a challenge across all types of programming. Even in decentralised programs, for example, in Guatemala the committees that design the menus need to ensure the participation of Indigenous parents.
- In decentralised approaches where funding may go directly to communities, national frameworks or guidelines are important in addition to capacity strengthening to accompany the process and ensure that the communities and the parent teacher committees are aware of what balanced, nutrient-rich and healthy diets are.
- Robust accountability systems need to be developed to ensure transparency and the integrity of the use of funds. There is a risk of sending funding directly to communities who then buy in bulk what is cheapest, which may most likely be processed foods.

¹⁵ In Brazil, Indigenous Peoples speak more than 150 languages (Bellinger and Andrade, 2016).

Challenges to local purchase:

- Differentiated programming requires Indigenous Peoples' producers to be aware of the local market opportunities. Programs need to have well-defined and transparent procedures that are accessible and reasonable to ensure Indigenous Peoples' producers' access.
- Purchasing local products from local producers has its own set of difficulties; for example, producers should be well-organized to guarantee deliverables in the amount and quality needed by the programme. For local produce to be integrated into programming, it must meet the programmes' standards of food safety. Administrative delays in payment can be problematic, especially for smaller farming operations. Moreover, some programmes require purchase from small scale or Indigenous Peoples' producers, but these regulations can be difficult to enforce.
- Programmes need to have adequate but also flexible and supportive processes, especially in areas that are vulnerable or particularly exposed to different types of shocks where Indigenous Peoples' production may be variable. The 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 and technical and organizational skills.

Common programming challenges:

- Food safety and quality assurance of local and fresh products is a challenge overall, but specifically in Indigenous Peoples' regions. Diverse foods, including ancestral foods, or traditional methods of food preparation are sometimes not allowed in rules and regulations. Additionally, more cultural awareness is needed on the side of implementers or policy makers to increase the acceptance of Indigenous Peoples' practices (Martinez-Cruz, 2022; Mercado et al., 2018).
- Food storage and waste can present challenges to Indigenous Peoples' communities. In remote areas for example, waste disposal from canned and boxed goods can be detrimental in delicate ecosystems like the Amazon. Moreover, communities may not have the facilities to store food.
- Robust and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of the impact and success (or not) of school meals, with community participation, must accompany any programme. Timely corrective action that can adapt to changes can ensure programme effectiveness.
- Disaggregation of data according to gender must be integrated into all programming to provide a gender analysis that could shed light on any gaps addressing Indigenous girls and boys, and producers (Siliprandi and Cintrão, 2021).

6. The way forward

Latin America and the Caribbean's social fabric is composed of different cultures sharing the same territory. It is a multicultural setting incorporating various food habits and preferences with unintended pressure on the land. Schools are made up of children from these diverse cultural contexts. In a social setting where one culture is present, having a menu that meets the expectations of the children and the adults is possible as in the examples of the differentiated approaches in Indigenous Peoples' communities. However, in a multicultural setting the process is more complicated and foods from the dominant culture will most likely dominate. If we seek an intercultural approach which enables a process of exchange and learning aimed at building the mutual respect of cultural and socioeconomic differences in a safe environment, then menus that incorporate Indigenous Peoples' foods and food traditions are to be encouraged and must have a place in school meals.

In Chile, since 2020 the school feeding project *Cocina con raíces* (Cuisine with roots) has been incorporated within the national school feeding programme *Programa de Alimentación de la Junta Nacional de Auxilio Escolar y Becas (JUNAEB)*. *Cocina con raíces* serves foods and recipes from Chile's Aymara, Mapuche, and Rapa Nui Indigenous communities in a public school system that reaches 1,600,000 children. This approach may also be an opportunity to revitalise Indigenous Peoples' foods and cultures in peri-urban and urban schools, and one that could potentially be replicated given that 52 percent of the Latin America and Caribbean region's Indigenous population live in urban areas.

Yet the process needs to be accompanied not only by diverse menus but with dialogue and the participation of Indigenous Peoples' including the purchase of local products from communities. School meals in a multicultural setting can provide conditions for a process that could lead to integration without any of the cultures losing their identity because of the integration.

The challenge moving forward is to enable processes that contribute to intercultural societies that abide by the principles of providing healthy, nutritious food produced locally (all or in part), encourage sustainable food systems for the local economy, and participation in decision making.

Moreover, one of the potential ways to influence more inclusive and intercultural policies is through global processes which raise awareness and work in partnership with governments, Indigenous Peoples' organisations, and various partners, among them UN agencies, to promote and support Indigenous sensitive programming. The Coalition on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems (Box 2) which emerged from the Food Systems Summit in 2021 is one such mechanism.

Box 2

Coalition on Indigenous Peoples' food systems

Policy change plays an important role in school meals programming. Policies that apply an intercultural lens have the potential to be more transformative and sustainable. During the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021, thanks to the leadership of Indigenous Peoples, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, FAO and other UN agencies, and seven governments, a Coalition on Indigenous Peoples' food systems was launched. The goals of the Coalition are to strengthen and reinforce Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems to achieve their rights to food, health, and self-determination. Consultations with Indigenous Peoples from different regions of the world have defined areas of work to take forward. Adequate meals for Indigenous children were set as a priority and a working line on school meals programmes was established.¹⁶

The analysis of the school meals programmes in different countries indicates there are multiple understandings of what is meant by an intercultural approach to a school meals programme. The definition provided in Box 1 is solid, but flexible enough to serve as a point of reference to each programme, decentralised or not. It also serves as a reference to those organizations or stakeholders outside of the government school meals programme, who are critical when linking food and diets to local production and food systems.

This **Special Report** provides an overview of the actions taking place to ensure school meals reach and respond to Indigenous Peoples' right to food which includes a dimension of adequacy and cultural appropriateness. The overview explored how Indigenous Peoples' preferences and needs are considered to improve children's food and nutrition security. Although there are several challenges, the region is taking steps towards an intercultural approach to school meals. School-based programmes can also serve as platforms and entry points to address broader issues regarding the right to self-development and 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 to the implementation of the programme with the active engagement of Indigenous Peoples. In conclusion, sovereign communities are better able to chart the course forward.

¹⁶ Analysing the various United Nations Food Systems 2021 country pathways and looking at the intersection of school meals programmes and Indigenous Peoples' food systems, the authors found that 29 countries could implement school meals based on Indigenous Peoples' food systems.

Case Study 2

Reflections on a visit to an Indigenous elementary and preschool in Quintana Roo, Mexico
(May 2023)

The following is based on a visit to an Indigenous elementary and preschool serving “warm” food in the municipality of José María Morelos, Quintana Roo, Mexico. Interviews were held with people working in the kitchen and the director of the school. State and municipal representatives of the government agency in charge of the school meal programme, *Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF)* were also present.



Each school has a committee made up of 3-5 parents. Some work in the kitchen either cooking or serving. The composition of the elementary school’s committee changes yearly with options of remaining on the committee. At the preschool each meal costs MX\$ 10.00 (approximately US\$ 0.56) The cost increases to MX\$ 15.00 for the elementary school students. At the preschool, around 50 percent of the 170 students eat the school meal, compared to 60-75 percent at the elementary school.



Every month DIF provides a list of products that the state buys, but not from local producers. The kinds and quantity of products depends on reports the school provides and, on the menu, which is designed by a dietician at state level. Locals do not participate in the design of the menu.



The state monitors the children’s weight and height, in addition to other basic health indicators like blood pressure. Levels of sugar, salt, and carbohydrates in the diet are also monitored. The parents, school and DIF personnel are committed to a job well done and have the wellbeing of the children in mind. They understand the meals should be designed using local products, but the present conditions are not set for moving in that direction. To do so the programme requires the intervention of other local and government agencies.



The personnel could work on standardizing procedures, and levels of decision-making. This could range from supplying kitchen goods and building better facilities for storage to identifying areas of opportunity in public policies that can enhance the number of students benefiting or ensuring job security to the employees and reducing the rotation rate of the personnel.

Based on the visit, and assuming it reflects the state’s program, it can be said that school meals in Quintana Roo have reached acceptable levels of implementation. However, the programme needs to scale up to meet the expectations of good intercultural practices. Quintana Roo can be a model for the country on how to implement an intercultural school meals program with training and a clear understanding of a pathway to interculturalism.

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