



The Journey of Armenia's National School Meals Programme – a Case Study

February 2025

Acknowledgements

This historical reconstruction benefited from the support of a wide range of individuals and institutions. The Government of Armenia and the World Food Programme (WFP) came together to share the common purpose of this endeavor. A spirit of respect and consensus-building has permeated all interactions. The author relied heavily on the cooperation of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports; the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency (NCEDI Foundation) through the efforts of Satenik Mkrtchyan; and the WFP Armenia Country Office leadership and staff who provided essential data access and logistical support. It is important to acknowledge the highly competent participation of Ms Nanna Skau, Current Country Director (Deputy Country Director at the time of interviewing), Maria Muradyan, Liana Kharatian, Vahan Arakelyan, Lusine Aghajanyan, and others. The staff demonstrated an active interest in the outcome of this historical reconstruction and provided insightful feedback. The author acknowledges the time and information shared by staff of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports; the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure at the national and provincial levels; the Ministry of Health, and other government officials. A special debt of gratitude and recognition is owed to the parents, school administrators, headteachers, and teachers who participated in this research and shared their invaluable experiences. We hope that this narrative contributes to efforts to showcase the Armenian experience in improving lives and contributing to building human capital through school meals. Staff from the WFP Regional Bureau in Cairo, including Jasmin Radwan and Irina Poshtatskaya, provided valuable reviews. This publication was commissioned and led by the WFP's School Meals and Social Protection Service through the efforts of Hanna Walsh and Soha Haky.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed are those of the external consultant and/or informants, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Armenia or WFP. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the author. Publication of this document does not imply Government of Armenia or WFP endorsement of opinions.

Research and writing

Neill Holland, World Food Programme, Rome;
Liana Kharatian World Food Programme, Armenia;
Hanna Walsh, World Food Programme, Rome,

Abbreviations

AMD	Armenian Dram
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MoESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports
SFCWA	School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency
SIFI	Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme
COVID-19	COVID-19 corona virus
NCEDI	National Centre for Education Development and Innovation
USD	US Dollars
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
PIU	Project Implementation Unit
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
SABER	Systems Approach to Better Education Results
GCNF	Global Child Nutrition Forum
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SFCWA	School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency
SNSMP	Sustainable School Feeding Programme
SME	Small and medium enterprises

Contents

Foreword.....	4
Executive Summary.....	6
Introduction	12
Armenian context	14
School meals in Armenia today	16
Targeting and coverage	16
Policy framework and governance	16
Programme financing	17
Procurement and modalities.....	18
Food basket and nutritional information.....	18
Parent, student and community involvement	19
Partners, civil society and private sector in Academia	19
Armenia and the School Meals Coalition	20
Armenia's school meal journey	22
Independence restored and partners lend support.....	22
The reintroduction of school meals.....	25
Global downturn results in new momentum around school meals	26
The start of institutionalised school meals in Armenia	29
A national model and coordination mechanisms explored	30
Armenia begins building a school meals policy framework	32
Learning exchange and preparation for the first transition to government.....	34
Government and stakeholders advance nationalisation of school meals	35
A cash-based school meals success arrives at Tavush province	38
A change of government yields new school meals champions.	40
Recent developments of the Armenian School Meal Programme.....	43
COVID-19: A test of resilience for Armenia's National School Meal Programme	43
Recent developments in the institutional set-up.....	44
Official final handover and conflict.....	45
Transformative approach to school meals	46
Future outlook for the Armenia National School Meal Programme	49
Conclusion	51
Key lessons learned:	52
Timeline of School Meals in Armenia	54

Foreword

School feeding has long been recognized as a critical investment in human capital, playing a crucial role in improving child nutrition, enhancing educational outcomes, and fostering positive behavioural change through the promotion of healthy diets and nutrition. Around the world, governments and international partners have collaborated to establish sustainable school feeding models that contribute to national development priorities while addressing food insecurity and poverty. Armenia's experience in school feeding is a testament to the power of strategic partnerships, resilience, and commitment to solutions that foster long-term community development.

In the early 2000s, as Armenia continued to navigate its post-Soviet transition, school feeding emerged as an essential intervention to support the country's most vulnerable children. The World Food Programme (WFP), in close collaboration with the Armenian Government, initiated a school feeding programme to improve attendance, reduce short-term hunger, and enhance learning capacities in targeted regions. By 2004, the programme had expanded significantly, covering thousands of primary school children in border and mountainous areas, where malnutrition and food insecurity were most pronounced.

However, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 presented unprecedented challenges, threatening to reverse the progress made over the previous decade. Economic contraction, rising poverty levels, and a decline in external funding placed the school feeding programme at risk. Recognizing the importance of sustaining this vital initiative, the Armenian Government, supported by the Russian Federation and WFP, forged a new approach to ensure the continuity and eventual nationalization of school feeding in Armenia.

Beginning in 2010, the transition towards a government-led school feeding model took shape, emphasizing capacity building, policy development, and financial sustainability. This marked a significant shift from externally managed food assistance to a nationally owned programme, designed to be integrated into Armenia's education system while promoting healthier eating habits and improved nutrition among schoolchildren. Through continued technical support from WFP and operational expertise from the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute, the Armenian Government strengthened its commitment to making school feeding an institutionalized and transformative element of its national policies, driving long-term community development.

Today, Armenia's school feeding programme stands as a model of collaboration, demonstrating how strategic investment, multi-sectoral coordination, and circular economy models can lead to sustainable success. The journey from emergency relief to a structured, government-led initiative highlights the importance of resilience, adaptability, and shared responsibility in fostering healthier generations.

Furthermore, Armenia has embraced transformative school feeding models that integrate self-reliance, sustainability, and community development. These models, which include school-based intensive gardens and greenhouses, as well as the installation of solar panels on school roofs, not only enhance the quality of school meals but also serve as a platform for education, vocational training, and the promotion of climate-smart agricultural practices. They also strengthen school capacities by reducing electricity costs through solar panels and incorporating greenhouse-grown vegetables into school meals while demonstrating to schoolchildren how their school's efforts in sustainable practices can contribute to a self-sufficient future.

Armenia has successfully covered all 10 regions with its school feeding programme and has officially handed over the management of this programme to the Government in 2023. Now, the focus has shifted to the development of a school feeding model specifically tailored for Yerevan, where efforts are underway to adapt and expand the programme to the capital's schools.

By investing in transformative models, Armenia ensures that schools are not only equipped to sustain school feeding but also to contribute to local economies, strengthen community resilience and foster long-term sustainability in food systems.

As Armenia continues to build on these foundations, its experience provides valuable lessons for other nations seeking to establish sustainable school feeding systems that promote child well-being, educational attainment, and long-term community development.

This case study captures Armenia's school feeding journey, offering insights into the challenges faced, the solutions implemented, and the lessons learned. It serves as a resource for policymakers, practitioners, and development partners committed to strengthening school feeding as a driver of improved education, access to nutritious food, and the adoption of healthy eating behaviours that contribute to overall national development.

Nanna Skau

Representative and Country Director
World Food Programme, Armenia

Executive Summary

Introduction

School meal programmes are a big investment in children's health, learning, and education. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the worldwide closure of schools, huge efforts have been made to get children back into school. As schools re-opened, school meal programmes proved more important than ever, not only addressing short-term hunger and food insecurity but also providing powerful incentives for parents to re-enroll children in school, thereby increasing school retention rates, especially among girls. This recovery in the provision of school meals has been more than 90 percent supported through domestic funds, and almost all countries have formally adopted national policies that help ensure the sustainability of these commitments. Armenia is among the countries that has recently taken over management of all school meal operations and strengthened its commitment to their National School Meal Programme. The purpose of this document is to detail Armenia's journey to reaching a government-led National School Meal Programme.

Reinstatement of school meals and economic challenges (2001–2009)

In 2001, Armenia reinstated school meals for the first time after gaining independence through a joint initiative of the Government of Armenia and the World Food Programme (WFP). The school meals provided aimed to address food insecurity

and high malnutrition levels among children linked to the severe economic recession post-independence. Initially, the programme covered 20,000 primary school children (14 percent). By 2004, the benefits of school meals for the children that received it were widely recognized, and the Armenian government was keen to expand coverage. School headmasters and teachers could see that school meals activities were connected to improved school attendance among children in the most vulnerable regions. In 2004, school meals coverage was increased by 50 percent to cover a total of 30,000 primary school children, including some of the most vulnerable children in the border and mountainous areas and refugee-populated areas in the Shirak, Tavush, Lori and Gegharkunik provinces where the highest levels of stunting in children were observed.

The Armenian economy showed signs of recovery in the early 2000s, with unemployment rates decreasing and national gross domestic product increasing. However, the global economic crisis of 2008 had a severe impact on Armenia, leading to a sharp decline in direct foreign investments; reduced demand for Armenian exports; and decreased remittance inflows. The global economic shock resulted in a significant reduction in both government and WFP funding for school meals, threatening its continuation. In response, the Russian government and the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI) stepped in to provide critical multi-year funding and technical assistance.

Rebuilding and expansion of school meal programmes (2010–2015)

A new phase of school meals began in 2010 through a pilot activity targeting 12,000 primary school children in the Tavush and Gegharkunik provinces. The aim of the new Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project was to advance multiple objectives, including the scaling up of school meals and technical assistance to build Armenian government capacity. This intervention focused on a new level of government ownership, responsibility and contribution, envisioning a gradual and full government takeover for the first time.

From 2011–12 onwards, there was a period of expansion of school meals and increased collaboration between stakeholders. In early 2011, Armenia hosted its first partners' conference on school meals sustainability in Yerevan. This conference led to significant planning and the reaffirmation of the Armenian government's commitment to the National School Meal Programme. WFP and SIFI worked closely together with the government, especially the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports – the new main government entity responsible for school meals – leading to some of the first inter-ministerial school meal working groups and committees being formed in 2011.

By 2012, children receiving school meals were provided with food five days a week, 180 days a year, with one of two modalities: hot meals and

fresh bread in two-thirds of the schools, and fruit bars in the remaining one-third of schools. The selected modality depended on the availability of appropriate kitchen facilities in schools. The number of primary school children receiving mid-day meals increased to 50,000 in 2012.

During 2012–2013, crucial documents such as the Concept of Sustainable School Feeding (2012) and the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Action Plan and Pilot Projects (2014–2016) were drafted. In these documents, the government articulated its commitment to a National School Meal Programme and validated the programme's implementation and handover arrangements. The two documents were approved by the Prime Minister, in recognition of the government's commitment to establishing a national programme. The Sustainable School Feeding Strategy (2014–2016) aimed for the government takeover of the first school meals caseload from WFP in Vayots Dzor by 2016.

In 2013–2014, the programme had expanded to 67,000 schoolchildren across approximately 900 schools, reaching children in all provinces. During this time, government coordination of the school meal programme was assigned to staff from the Centre of Educational Programmes Project Implementation Unit (PIU), situated in the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. The goal was that responsibility for project implementation would gradually be transferred to PIU in all provinces, along with increased project funding from the national budget. However, PIU staff struggled with competing commitments.

First transitions and lessons learned (2016–2019)

As the Armenian government prepared for the planned 2016 transition of the school meals case-load from WFP to national control, a Ministerial decree in June 2015 established the Inter-Ministerial Working Group on school meals. This decree also designated a School Feeding Implementation Unit within the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. These were the first steps towards building coordination capacity within the Government. However, the attempted handover in 2016 revealed significant gaps in not only government capacity, but kitchen infrastructure and food hygiene standards, leading to the immediate suspension of the transition to ensure the provision of safe and nutritious school meals.

Following this setback, SIFI and the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports conducted a joint assessment to address the identified issues. This experience underscored the importance of realistic target-setting, adequate planning and comprehensive training. Consequently, the Ministry of Health issued an order in 2016 to establish sanitary rules and norms for educational institutions and to set sanitation and hygiene requirements for the National School Meal Programme.

The Government of Armenia hosted the 18th Global Child Nutrition Forum in 2016, reinforcing its role in South-South cooperation and enhancing its knowledge and understanding of school meals. This event catalysed the establishment of the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation, which was later restructured into the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency in 2019, the entity still currently in charge of managing the National School Meal Programme.

In 2017, in collaboration with WFP, the government began updating the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy (2014–2016). This update introduced a significant shift from the previous model – where WFP centrally procured and delivered food to schools – to a new cash-based approach, allowing schools to procure food locally. Two annexes to the strategy outlined new elements and approaches for school meals and set out a revised handover timeline aiming for full national implementation. The government committed to transitioning one province per year from the WFP portfolio to national control, starting with Tavush in 2017, followed by Shirak in 2018 and Aragatsotn in 2019.

Prior to the transition in Tavush Province, thorough market assessments, infrastructure evaluations and training sessions were conducted to ensure readiness and avoid previous mistakes. In February 2017, for the first time, the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency took over WFP's operations in Tavush. This successful transition covered 7,600 children across 74 schools. Once transitioned, headteachers and parents in Tavush prioritized local products, with 90 percent of funds spent on locally produced or processed items. The second provincial school meals caseload – at Shirak – was transferred to the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency during the 2018 academic year. Soon after, at the start of 2019, the third planned province, Aragatsotn, was transitioned to the government's school meals portfolio. In mid-2019, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and WFP completed and affirmed the Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme 2019–2023, to guide the programme period from 2019 to 2023 and to complete the remaining handovers.

COVID-19 adjustment (2020–2022)

However, the above-mentioned timeline was halted with the arrival of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which led to the nationwide closure of schools in March 2020. To ensure food access for schoolchildren, the government and WFP provided alternative take-home rations to over 102,000 children. Cash transfers were also given to the guardians of 26,000 vulnerable primary schoolchildren. In addition, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict displaced many families, prompting WFP to extend its operations to support over 1,500 displaced primary schoolchildren enrolled in Armenian schools.

As schools reopened in mid-October 2021, WFP provided food to the Armavir, Kotayk and Lori provinces, which had not yet transitioned to government control. As a sign of its enduring

commitment to the National School Meal Programme, the Armenian administration reallocated unused pandemic funds to renovate school kitchens, cafeterias and other vital infrastructure. To mitigate the impact of the pandemic, WFP and SIFI initiated widescale training sessions, intensive monitoring visits and oversight missions to schools.

In 2021, regional administrations and WFP organized donor conferences and fundraising events, resulting in significant private investments to improve kitchen infrastructure in the Gegharkunik and Lori provinces. During 2021, Armenia joined the School Meals Coalition, a member state effort that aims to ensure by 2030 every child worldwide receives a healthy meal in school. In 2022, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and WFP signed an updated Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme, setting out their mutually agreed transition plan and timeline.



Children enjoy a mid-day hot meal provided by Armenia's National School Meal Programme.



Completion of handover, conflict and outlook (2023 onwards)

By July 2023, WFP had completed the handover of all school meal operations to the Armenian government. This milestone was celebrated with all partners, including the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, which emphasized Armenia's continued commitment to the School Meal Programme and expanding the programme to Yerevan.

The escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in late 2023 displaced over 100,000 people, including 15,424 refugee children who were enrolled in Armenian schools. The National School Meal Programme extended its capacity to accommodate these children.

In 2023, the Armenian government solidified its commitment to the National School Meal Programme by announcing its national School Meals Coalition commitments regarding school

meals, including the goals for expanding coverage to the capital of Yerevan, enhancing programme quality, sustaining the budget and integrating school meals into legislation. With WFP support, the Armenian government is prioritizing a transformative school meals model, integrating school meals with community development, promoting climate-smart agricultural practices, healthy lifestyles and sustainable local economies. The next steps involve developing a national strategy and action plan for nationwide school meals, aiming to ensure that every school-aged child in Armenia has access to nutritious meals by 2030.

Conclusion

Armenia's journey to developing a sustainable and resilient National School Meal Programme demonstrates the power of strong government commitment, effective partnerships and adaptive strategies. The programme's transformative approach leverage school meals for broader educational and community benefits, setting a model for other nations.



Key lessons learned:

- Multi-year funding from the donor (the Russian Federation) was crucial in allowing more long-term planning of school meal operations.
- Involvement of a skilled technical partner (SIFI), which together with WFP continued to improve and refine the school meal model, has led to enhanced community development and ownership.
- Working in direct collaboration with government ministries was key to ensuring school meal operations were in alignment with government priorities and enabled the transitioning of school meal operations to be planned with the government, which should be the goal.
- Establishing direct lines of communication with relevant ministries responsible for education, social security and agriculture was necessary to work on joint plans and strategies for a National School Meal Programme, which is an inherently cross-sectoral venture. Inter-ministerial coordination teams were crucial to managing school meals in a holistic way and to acquire adequate funding.
- Engagement and buy-in from high-level champions were pivotal, e.g. the Prime Minister of Armenia approved the School Feeding Concept and Strategy recognizing the government's commitment to establishing the national programme.
- Situational and context analyses, SABER exercises and evaluations were necessary to understand previous errors and gaps, which in turn helped to create a better National School Meal Programme. Furthermore, regular reviews and updates of flexible handover plans was also key to continued progress, despite setbacks and changes.
- Ensuring skills, resources and good management of school meal operations at both central and decentralized levels was key for successful National School Meal Programme operations. This required investment in physical infrastructure, such as kitchen and storage facilities and equipment; and capacity building, especially at decentralized levels, such as province and school level.
- Working more closely at decentralized government level and with communities, appropriate target-setting and gradual handover plans with concrete steps are necessary for the successful transition of school meal operations. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the transition process is not linear, requires flexibility and time, as well as regular reviews and changes in plans.
- A committed budget from the government is necessary to ensure continuity, but community resilience can and should be built up by providing resources and inputs for communities to create their own revenue to invest back into school meals and communities when needed.
- Social behaviour change interventions and rigorous monitoring and evaluation arrangements are needed to ensure the sustainability and quality of school meals in the long term.

Introduction: The state of school meals around the world

At the beginning of 2020, school meals were delivered to more children in more countries than ever before.¹ However, these increasingly successful programmes were severely affected by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. In April of that year, around 370 million children missed out on school meals due to school closures – representing 95 percent of school meal recipients globally.²

Since COVID-19, huge efforts have been made to get children back into school. As schools re-opened in the wake of COVID-19, school meal programmes proved more important than ever because they not only addressed short-term

hunger and food insecurity but also provided powerful incentives for parents to re-enroll children in school, and increase school retention rates, especially among girls. The number of children being reached by school meal programmes in 2022 exceeded pre-pandemic levels, where 418 million children now benefit from school meals worldwide, 30 million more than the 388 million children reached before the pandemic in early 2020.³

School meals are transformative because they provide a market for local food and livelihoods for communities. Data shows that school meal programmes have created approximately four

1 WFP. State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020. United Nations World Food Programme; Rome, Italy

2 WFP. Futures of 370 million children in jeopardy as school closures deprive them of school meals. Available at: <https://www.wfp.org/news/futures-370-million-children-jeopardy-school-closures-deprive-them-school-meals-unicef-and-wfp>

3 WFP. State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022. United Nations World Food Programme; Rome, Italy.



million direct jobs in 85 countries, which equates to 1,377 jobs for every 100,000 children fed. Most of these jobs are related to the preparation of food, benefitting local cooks and small catering companies, most of which are led by women.

This recovery in the provision of school meals has been more than 90 percent supported through domestic funds, and almost all countries have formally adopted national policies that help ensure the sustainability of these commitments. Armenia is among the countries that has strengthened its resolve to provide free school meals nationwide. The purpose of this document is to detail Armenia's journey to reaching a government-led National School Meal Programme.

While individual components of the programme have been studied and widely reported, a comprehensive record of Armenia's school meals journey has yet to be published for consideration by the Armenian public and within the wider school meals community of practice. This publication, covering three decades of school meals, is the result of a thorough desk review and numerous interviews with Armenia's national, provincial and local school meal administrators – spanning multiple decades of service – as well as implementing partners, headteachers and school meal recipients. The aim is for this publication to fill the gap in the written record by providing a lively and accessible historical narrative fit for all audiences.



Armenian context: primary education and national food security

Armenia is a land-locked country located in the mountainous Caucasus region between Asia and Europe sharing borders with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Georgia and Iran. It has a population of just under 3 million, with one million people residing in the capital, Yerevan. According to recent data, 20 percent of the population is under 14 years old.⁴ Armenia is subdivided into 11 administrative divisions: ten are provinces and the eleventh is Yerevan, which has special administrative status (Figure 1). Each province consists of self-governing municipalities.

Armenian children attend primary and secondary school from age six to 16 years with some continuing until 18. The country has reached a 100 percent literacy rate among the population over 15 years old.⁵ Primary school enrolment is around 94 percent⁶ and secondary school enrolment is at 97 percent.⁷ Government expenditure on education, as a percentage of the total national budget, stands at 9.7 percent.⁸ To tackle the labour mismatch and enhance the quality of education, Armenia has been working to reform its education system. Most recently, Armenia's Ministry of Education Science Culture and Sports, published a new education sector policy defined in the Education Development Strategy 2022–2030 and Plan of Activities 2022–2026.⁹

Just under 25 percent of Armenians live below the poverty line.¹⁰ The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for managing Armenia's social protection programmes, including social

assistance, social care services, labour market interventions and social insurances. A new social protection strategy is currently being developed in Armenia, where social protection is defined as “a set of policies and programmes, aiming at preventing and protecting all people, throughout their life-cycle, from poverty, unemployment, insecurity and social exclusion, placing a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups”. Consequently, the social protection system is gradually being regarded not only as a set of programmes and services targeted at meeting the social needs of vulnerable and needy people, but rather an overall network of sustainable mechanisms and services to protect the whole population at varying life stages from various social and/or economic risks, shocks and crises and to strengthen the resilience of the population.

Based on the fifth Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment in 2023, 30 percent of Armenian households are food insecure, and another 44 percent are marginally food secure.¹¹ Data from Armenia from 2000 to 2016 shows that thinness among children and adolescents aged 5–19 slightly increased among girls and its reduction plateaued among boys.¹² Meanwhile, overweight and obesity rates have increased since 2000 among children aged 5–19. Overweight and obesity are public health problems among Armenian children where 27.7 percent of surveyed children were found to be

4 Armenian Population Census 2022. https://armstat.am/file/article/demog_2022_2.pdf

5 World Bank Group, 2020. Literacy rate, adult total (% of people aged 15 and above) – Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=AM>

6 World Bank Group, 2023. School enrollment, primary (% gross) - Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRR?locations=AM>

7 World Bank Group, 2022. School enrollment, secondary (% gross) – Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR?end=2022&locations=AM&skipRedirection=true&start=1991&view=chart>

8 World Bank Group, 2022. Government expenditure on education – Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?locations=AM>

9 MoESCS, 2022. Draft Education Development Strategy is discussed with development partners. <https://escs.am/en/news/11672>

10 World Bank Group, 2022. Poverty headcount ratio, Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=AM>

11 Fifth Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment Armenia in Armenia 2023. docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000151180/download/?ga=2.232409308.2129212756.1693214501-2004369333.1669678612

12 Global Nutrition Report, 2022. Armenia. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/western-asia/armenia/>



Figure 1. Map of Armenia's provinces known as marzes in Armenian

overweight, and 12.6 percent were obese.¹³ Obesity and overweight among children are more of a problem in urban and semi-urban areas, while stunting, underweight and wasting have a higher prevalence in rural areas.

Anaemia is also still prevalent among 20 percent of children aged 6–59 months, further indicating Armenia's struggle with the triple burden of malnutrition.¹⁴

In 2022, the Government of Armenia approved a National Food Security Strategy¹⁵ developed by the Ministry of Economy. The National School Meal Programme and school-based agricultural food value chain projects are included in the strategy's action plan as a measure to ensure food security for schoolchildren.

The Government of Armenia also approved the Concept on Improving Child Nutrition in Armenia and Plan of Actions for 2015–2020 developed by the Ministry of Health. The aim of the concept was to achieve better nutritional results for children over a long-term perspective; however, priority is given to the first 1,000 days of life, focusing on ensuring proper nutrition during pregnancy and the first 24 months of life.¹⁶

Armenia lies in an area of high seismic activity that affects the environmental landscape.

Therefore, the country is susceptible to shocks and natural adversities such as droughts, hailstorms, floods and landslides. Salinisation is also an issue. These factors make Armenia one of the most vulnerable countries in Europe and Central Asia to climate change.¹⁷ Armenia is focusing on supporting the aggregation of small farm holdings; promotion of crop diversification and risk management; increasing climate change awareness, adaptation and mitigation; as well as investing in digitalisation of the agricultural sector. Armenia also aims to support commercial farming for export; improve the quality of agricultural products; and engage youth.

¹³ The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (Cosi) National Study Results in the Republic of Armenia, 2019

¹⁴ World Bank Group, 2019. Prevalence of anaemia among children (% of children aged 6–59 months) – Armenia. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.ANM.CHLD.ZS?locations=AM>

¹⁵ Armenian Ministry of Economy. Working Draft of the Food Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia (Programme), 2022. <https://www.e-draft.am/projects/4897/about>

¹⁶ UNICEF Armenia, 2016. Improving Infant and Young Child Health and Nutrition. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M9VW.pdf

¹⁷ Armenian Government, Ministry of Economy. The Strategy of the Main Directions Ensuring Economic Development in Agricultural Sector of the Republic of Armenia 2020–2030. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/arm201644.pdf>

School meals in Armenia today

Targeting and coverage

Today, the Armenian school meal programme covers more than 102,000 primary schoolchildren from grades one to four, for all 180 school days in ten provinces (except for the capital of Yerevan), through cash transfers to more than 1,000¹⁸ schools.

After a phased approach of transitioning the programme to national ownership that started in 2014, the Government of Armenia fully took over operational implementation from the World Food Programme (WFP) in 2023. WFP had been implementing school meals in the country with funding from the Russian Federation. The Government of Armenia is now successfully managing and funding its own National School Meal Programme. **Figure 2 depicts the growth in government coverage over the years as WFP has gradually handed over schools to the Armenian National School Meal Programme.**

Policy framework and governance

The importance of the National School Meal Programme was summarised following way: “Seventy percent of our students do not have breakfast. The school meals programme is successfully addressing this gap. Daily school meals improve their mood and attention, control of emotions and behaviour. Students who had their mid-day meal at school, are more relaxed and more eager to learn compared to those who did not.” Mary Ghandalyan, Div. Head of the Department of Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Syunik Province.

The National School Meal Programme is led by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS), with support from the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency (SFCWA) and technical support from WFP and the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI).

The National School Meal Programme is governed through resolution No. 52 of the Government of the Republic of Armenia No.52 “On the Approval of the Concept of the ‘Sustainable School Feeding’ Project” dated 27 December 2012.¹⁹ Additionally, “the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Plan of Activities, and Pilot Project” was approved by the Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia through resolution No. 33 dated 22nd of August 2013.²⁰ By 2025, the government intends to revise the School Feeding Strategy to reflect the updates and nationalisation of the school meal programme.

In the first half of 2023, with support from WFP, the Government of Armenia developed and approved a law that recognises kitchen helpers and gardeners as school staff. This includes provisions for their salary, social protection and length of service, ensuring their integration into the school system. This policy affects around 3,000 persons.²¹

¹⁸ Reporting dated to 1st of January 2023.

¹⁹ Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Armenia No.52 dated 27 December 2012 “On the Approval of the Concept of the ‘Sustainable School Feeding’ Project” arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=80681

²⁰ Resolution No.33 dated 22nd of August 2013 on “the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Plan of Activities, and Pilot Project” arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=85348

²¹ Legislation: Order no. 79 of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Government of Armenia: arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=182175

Programme financing

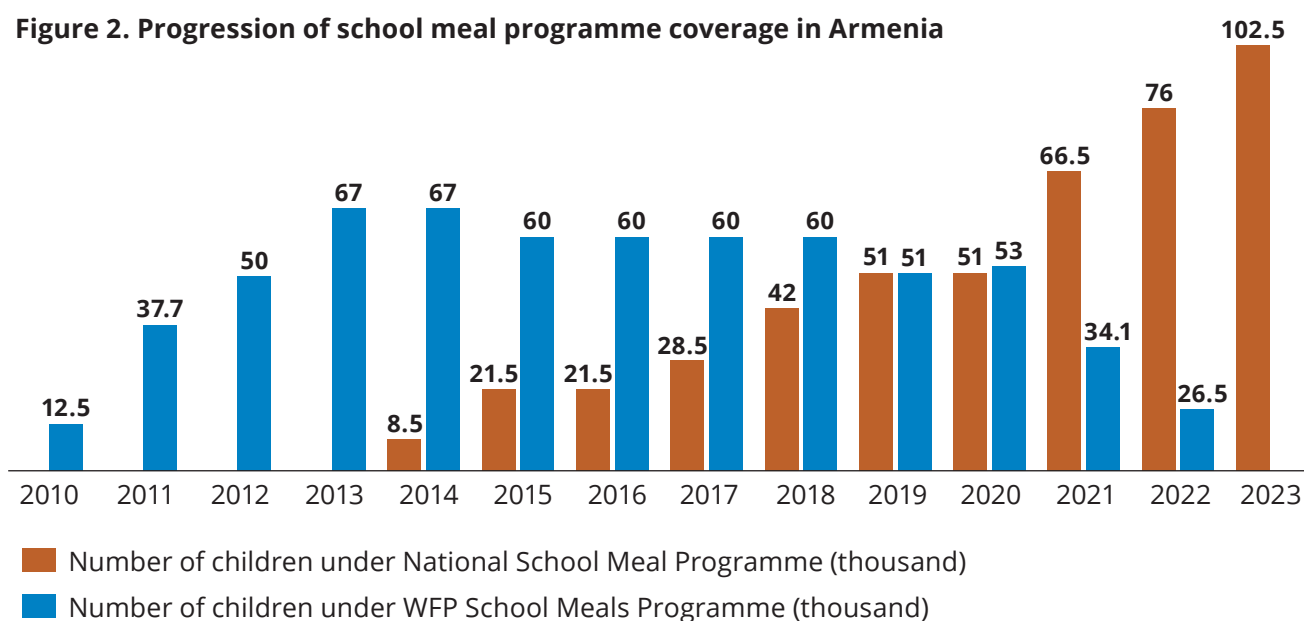
Despite tight budgetary constraints, the Government of Armenia has secured funding for the National School Meal Programme in all provinces, except for Yerevan. From 2014, the government gradually increased the budget allocation each year as new marzes (administrative divisions) were handed over to the government. In 2023, the government assumed funding of the entire programme through national resources, investing 151 Armenian Drams per child per

day for 180 school days, for more than 102,000 children. Typically, ahead of each year's budget formulation, discussions and planning go on for months. This includes discussion on the national programme's annual budget, which is based on the school meal programme implementation reports received from schools. The programme's financing plan is revised reflecting the expansion and evolution of the National School Meal Programme. **Table 1 shows the progression in programme financing from 2014.**

Table 1: Progression of programme financing and costs of school meals (USD = US Dollar)

Year	Children covered by the National School Meal Programme	Government budget per school year (180 school meal days) in USD	Cost per child per day in USD
2014	8,500	382,500	0.25
2015	21,500	967,500	0.25
2016	21,500	967,500	0.25
2017	28,500	1,282,500	0.25
2018	42,000	1,890,000	0.25
2019	51,000	2,295,000	0.25
2020	51,000	2,295,000	0.25
2021	66,500	2,992,500	0.25
2022	76,000	4,240,800	0.31
2023	102,500	5,719,500	0.31

Figure 2. Progression of school meal programme coverage in Armenia



Since 2013, the government has covered the WFP-administered programme's transportation, storage and handling costs. Over the years, the Armenian National School Meal Programme received robust multi-year contributions from the Russian Federation, channelled to WFP, amounting to USD 25 million between 2010 and 2019, and an additional USD 18 million for the period between 2019 and 2023. These contributions have allowed the successful implementation of school meals; improvements in school meal infrastructure development; and the provision of new equipment to school kitchens. These contributions also facilitated the introduction of innovative elements to develop schools' food production capacities through the establishment of school greenhouses, orchards, bakeries and solar energy systems that support the diversity and provision of school meals and contribute to job creation, as well as institutional capacity building at all levels.

Procurement and modalities

For the National School Meal Programme, food is procured individually by schools through tenders prepared by school staff, with oversight from parent committees. Schools compare prices from at least three different bidders and/or obtain price quotations from potential suppliers. Food for school meals is sourced according to public procurement procedures directly from a qualified list of commodity retailers. If the value exceeds AMD 1,000,000 (approximately USD 2,530), a published request for quotation is required. Food is procured from the pre-identified commodity list, constituting 20 food items. The cash transfers are calculated at the established per child per school day amount of cash for a given school year. Under the cash-based transfer modality, kitchen helpers receive a salary for preparation of school meals during the school year.

In 2023–2024, the Armenian Ministry of Education, the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency and WFP launched a pilot of

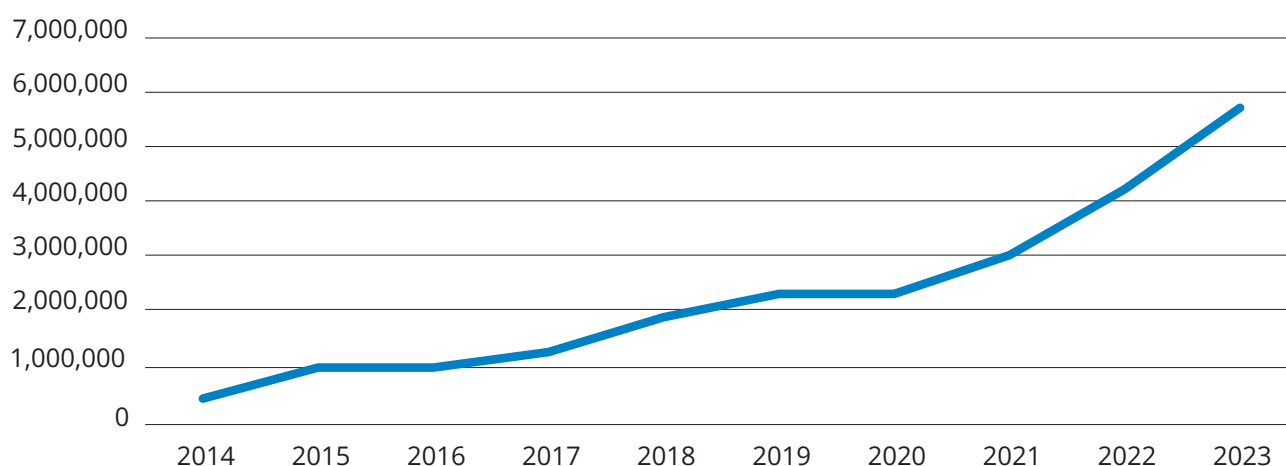
Commercial School Meals. The pilot provides hot meals to children in grades 5–9 (outside of the national programme targeting and coverage criteria) and is to be paid for by parents who know and appreciate the value of school meals and can afford it, and who have had a good experience with school meals for their children covered through the national programme from grades 1–4. Using the results of this initiative, a commercial school meals model – for children in grades 5–9 in schools with proper facilities – was developed and presented to the MoESCS for approval and is about to be launched with consultation and technical support from the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency. Schools implementing commercial school meals are allowed to use the proceeds to pay salaries, cover logistics and/or kitchen expenses.

A child's participation in commercial school meals requires an application from the parent, followed by an agreement in writing between the school and parent on their respective rights and responsibilities. The government is now considering including commercial school meals in the updated National School Feeding Strategy.

Food basket and nutritional information

The Armenian National School Meal Programme provides children with hot and nutritious meals from school premises that are renovated and equipped. The meals provide children with at least 32 percent of their daily caloric needs and 41 and 46 percent of their daily requirements for protein and fat, respectively. The food basket includes wheat flour, rice, pasta, buckwheat, split peas, lentils, beans, cheese, poultry, eggs, potatoes, apples, onions, cabbage, carrots and red beets. School meals in Armenia are currently not fortified. Food safety and quality is assured by the Food Safety Control Body, which ensures that any food item schools procure from commodity retailers has the appropriate labels, certificates, expiry dates and goes through a visual quality check.

Figure 3. Government allocated budget per school year (180 school meal days) in USD



Parent, student and community involvement

With the support of the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency, parent councils in Armenia are encouraged to provide oversight over food procurement tenders; provide complaints and feedback; and contribute financially or in-kind to the food baskets. Parent councils also participate in improving school infrastructure and receive training on nutrition education, healthy habits and sustainable agricultural practices. Parents sometimes cover the costs of hygiene supplies for kitchens and eating utensils. Parent and community contributions are entirely voluntary, typically small and occasionally erratic due to limited incomes/harvests, but the schools are grateful to receive them. Parental contributions are accurately registered in official accounts for transparency and accountability. However, there is still a need to establish guidance and regulations on parental contributions.

Parents provide feedback through a complaints/suggestions and feedback mechanism. Schools put up letterboxes for letters addressed to school management in visible areas of the schools. The boxes are opened at regular intervals, and feedback is provided either in writing or through discussion with parents. A school meals feedback phone number is operated by the School Feeding

and Child Welfare Agency. MoESCS also has a hotline service for all matters regarding education, including school meals. The mechanism allows independent control and contributes to improved accountability. Feedback received regarding different aspects of school meals can result in positive changes to the national programme, benefiting children, schools and food service staff.

According to school headteachers, before the National School Meal Programme was established, parents visited their children's school infrequently, but now they visit more often to see how their children eat; how meals are prepared; and how their contributions are used.

Partners, civil society and private sector in Academia

The growing recognition of the importance and benefits of school meals over time led to the building of strategic alliances with a diverse group of stakeholders, including the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), researchers, universities, national and international development organisations, and UN agencies. Partnership with the private sector in some areas has allowed co-financing of school renovation works and is proving essential to enhancing the programme's long-term sustainability.

In 2023, MoESCS and WFP initiated a partnership with “Yeremyan Projects,” one of the largest dairy companies in the country. Through a collaborative “School Milk” pilot project, which was implemented for a full school year from January 2023, approximately 250 students in grades 5–8, in two schools in Vayots Dzor Province, started their school day with a glass of milk. One of the objectives of the project was to encourage behaviour change towards healthier dietary habits (breakfast, less snacking and sugary drinks, and healthier choices). This is a unique public-private partnership built around the concept of behaviour change to promote healthy habits among children. According to the project’s mid-term results, after the summer holidays of 2023, 30 percent of targeted schoolchildren had started drinking milk and reduced their consumption of unhealthy, sugary drinks.

Additionally, MoESCS and WFP are partnering with the Armenian National Agrarian University to develop financially viable approaches for school-based food value chains; and to develop and introduce a curriculum on sustainable agricultural practices, fostering education on self-reliant, environmentally friendly farming practices. Partnerships have been established with local NGOs to engage in the establishment of school-based agricultural facilities and training for 51 schools under the National School Meal Programme.

Armenia and the School Meals Coalition

In 2021, the government went further in its commitment to school meals by joining the School Meals Coalition, a member state effort that aims to ensure by 2030 every child worldwide receives a healthy meal in school.

To drive concerted action, particularly at the country-level, and reach the collective goal and objectives of the School Meal Coalition, member states are encouraged to develop ambitious, actionable commitments in regard to improving their national school meals programmes. Hence, in 2023, the Government of Armenia announced its national School Meals Coalition commitments regarding school meals, which stating that the government will commit to make school meals universally available to all students through different modalities; expand coverage to include the capital of Yerevan by 2030; and continue to enhance programme quality through working with partners.²² The government also committed to sustain and upgrade the national budget allocation to school meals; fully institutionalise school meals by integrating the programme into national education legislation; review and update national school meals standards; develop a school meals strategy by 2025; continue improving school infrastructure and staff capacity; develop a national education curriculum, including modules on healthy eating habits for children; and continue to build schools’ adaptive capacities to continue operating the school meals programmes regardless of shocks and crises.

22 Armenia’s commitments to the School Meals Coalition (SMC) <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/commitments/#Armenia>

The Armenian school meals story is a true testament to the resilience and fortitude of the Armenian people, and the decision made by national leaders to invest in child health and nutrition, which will resonate with any parent or community leader who has ever imagined a brighter future for their children than the one they see today.

There is much that other countries can learn from Armenia's school meals experience where institutionalisation of the school meal programme is helping to build resilience in the face of recurrent shocks to the food

system and national economy. In particular, the Armenian transition from donor support for school meals dependent on in-kind food commodities, to a nationally led and financed school meal programme availed through a cash transfer to schools -approach is a successful example of a viable model widely applicable for government-to-government learning. Armenia's community resilience approach has facilitated the introduction of fresh foods and transformative infrastructure to promote sustainability through circular cost-effective and self-reliant models, including solar stations, orchards, greenhouses and more.



Armenia's school meal journey

This section explores and details Armenia's school meals journey throughout the last decades, documenting both the successes and challenges, that allowed Armenia to arrive at its current status in providing school meals.

Independence restored and partners lend support

Armenia in the period of independence

Armenia acquired its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This, and the major earthquake in 1988, compounded challenges to the country's stability, resulting in population displacement. Due to the economic hardship that characterised the period, many individuals left Armenia between 1990 and 1995 in search of employment opportunities abroad. The socioeconomic situation was further affected by the armed conflict over the Nagorno-Kharabakh region and subsequent blockade against Armenia, which resulted in more displacement.

Heavily dependent on intra-Soviet trade links, Armenia's economy nearly collapsed in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's break-up: in 1994, Armenia's gross national product dropped by 60 percent compared to 1991, and unemployment in the industrial sector reached 60 percent.

Armenia was traditionally dependent on food imports from other parts of the former Soviet Union. The country consists predominantly of uplands, which make as much as 80 percent of the territory unsuitable for cultivation.²³ Domestic grain production covers just 30–40 percent of requirements, resulting in annual food deficits. In the years following independence, corresponding figures for dairy and meat were

hardly more encouraging. Global shortfalls in the 1990s caused further setbacks and supply-side challenges for the country's agricultural sector.

In 1993–94, the government raised its social security payments and child allowances in an effort to provide a safety net to the most vulnerable households and cushion the impact of macro-economic reform; however, the transfers were quickly eroded by inflation. With subsidies eliminated, food prices and the cost of other basics increased; for example, bread prices increased sharply between late 1994 and May 1997. Meanwhile, real wages decreased by 85 percent over the same four-year period, stirring social tension. Considering the structural cereal deficit and a gross national product per capita of just USD 608 in 1994, Armenia was classified as a low-income food-deficient country from 1995 by FAO and a low-income economy by the World Bank.²⁴

International partnerships emerge

In response to the acute hardships Armenia faced, in 1991, international partners began mobilising to support the government's efforts. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), initiated a poverty assessment system in 1991, known as PAROS ("Beacon" in Armenian), which was used extensively by WFP and NGOs to streamline the targeting of humanitarian aid.²⁵ PAROS data analysis in 1991 showed that 13 percent of the population were extremely poor, with an income covering only 50 percent of a minimum monthly food basket. Within this group, including pensioners, single mothers, their children, and the disabled, many sought to sustain themselves on minimal state allowances of less than USD 8 per month. Household diets for these groups were mainly limited to bread, potatoes, rice and cabbage, and supplementary food assistance was necessary

²³ FAO. Armenia at a glance. www.fao.org/armenia/fao-in-armenia/armenia-at-a-glance

²⁴ World Food Programme, 1999. Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation – Armenia 6120.01. Executive Board Third Regular Session, Rome. https://executive-board.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000032033

²⁵ PAROS assessed the vulnerability of each household, according to family composition, household income and assets, and adequacy of living accommodation.



to maintain their nutritional status. The situation of refugees, internally displaced populations and earthquake victims was also difficult.

To support government efforts, WFP started providing food assistance in 1993 targeting refugees and internally displaced populations. However, it soon became clear that part of the resident population was suffering as much hardship as the displaced population; therefore, new targeting mechanisms were put in place to ensure the equitable distribution of food based on vulnerability to food shortages. During this period, the Government of Armenia's Humanitarian Assistance Central Commission, the Ministry of Social Welfare and WFP arranged for food distributions and other forms of assistance that primarily targeted individuals in the northern earthquake zone, including orphans, families with more than four children, disabled persons, dwellers in temporary accommodations, lonely pensioners and caretakers of children. Meanwhile, other vulnerable individuals received food aid through NGOs, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which was focused on assistance to hospitals, orphanages and boarding schools. By 1996, a World Bank assessment showed that 55 percent of the Armenian population was living in poverty, and families with children comprised 82 percent of the nation's poor.²⁶

As part of the emergency operation, in 1995, the Armenian government and WFP introduced community-based Food for Work projects to create employment and income, and to build the infrastructure necessary for sustained national development. From 1995 to June 1999, the initiative provided job opportunities, food assistance, reforestation, rehabilitation of irrigation canals, reconstruction of water pipelines to supply clean water, renovated hospitals and

clinics. Tens of thousands of Armenian children benefited from the renovation and winter-proofing²⁷ of over 350 schools and kindergartens, resulting in improved conditions for their regular classroom attendance and learning.

The Armenian government and WFP envisioned a phase-out of the emergency assistance operation by spring 1999, when the national economy was expected to have sufficiently recovered from the various crises. However, the financial crisis that arrived in Russia in late 1998, where 25 percent of Armenia's foreign trade was focused, had a severe impact on the Armenian economy. As a result, many Armenian workers in Russia returned home, adding to the number of unemployed people in the country. Remittances, a major source of family income, dropped to just 10 percent of their previous level.

In January 1999, a Joint Donor Assessment Mission to the Caucasus concluded that, even though the situation in Armenia had stabilised, support was still needed for the country's relief and recovery. Consequently, the emergency operation was terminated on 30 June 1999, and without delay, WFP's first protracted relief and recovery operation for Armenia was approved for an interim period of six months.

At this time, findings from a joint Nutritional Survey between UNICEF and WFP revealed that the poor variety and quality of food were affecting the population.²⁸ Low height-for-age was observed in 13 percent of children under five, indicating a situation of chronic malnutrition. Although acute malnutrition wasn't widespread, 12 percent of children under 5 exhibited symptoms of stunting and 25 percent suffered from anaemia. Mild and moderate anaemia was also observed in 15 percent of women surveyed, particularly among rural refugees (18

26 World Food Programme, 1999. Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation – Armenia 6120.01. Executive Board Third Regular Session, Rome. https://executive-board.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000032033

27 Winter-proofing refers to ensuring that buildings, heating systems, equipment and emergency systems are prepared for winter weather.

28 "A survey of four population strata (urban resident, rural resident, urban refugee, rural refugee) was conducted in May 1998 to investigate the health and nutritional status of resident and refugee women and children in Armenia. The survey was carried out on 2,627 households and included 3,433 children under 5 and 2,649 women of reproductive age (18–45)." WFP Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation, Armenia, 1999. https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000032033

percent), and the number of home births had increased significantly, reflecting the economic deterioration and poor quality of care/hygiene conditions in maternity wards.

The reintroduction of school meals

Historically, and prior to Armenian independence in 1991, school meals were included within the country's primary education mandate. Although the specific details of Soviet-era guidance on food basket composition and the case-load coverage of school meals are largely lost to time, many Armenian adults will positively recall the provision of milk and wheat buns and a daily snack during their primary school years. According to senior school meal practitioners, school canteens were present in Armenia's urbanised areas, and particularly vulnerable children – those of female-headed households, for example – could receive vouchers for cost-free, mid-day meals. Conversely, canteens were rare in rural schools during the Soviet period, and children did not enjoy the same level of access to daily meals at school, meaning that rural children routinely went without breakfast or lunch. For children in higher grades, it is estimated that in the period preceding independence,

approximately half of students had access to food at school, which was typically sourced from canteens at mid-day, with money they had brought from home.

The Soviet practice of government-afforded school meals was halted during the turbulent post-independence period, which brought with it sky-rocketing food price inflation. Although children from poor households were targeted with international humanitarian assistance throughout the 1990s, the lack of nutritious daily meals at school left the Armenian government without one of its tools for addressing child malnutrition, stunting and anaemia, made apparent through the 1998 UNICEF Nutritional Survey.²⁹

In response to the worrying findings on child nutrition, the Armenian government and WFP collaborated to reintroduce school meals through the protracted relief and recovery operation. From the 2001 school year, daily school meals were served to 20,000 primary schoolchildren in two provinces, representing 14 percent of all primary schoolchildren at the time.

29 WFP. Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation, Armenia, 1999. https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000032033

A note on parental contributions to school meals

The reintroduction of school meals in selected Armenian primary schools was celebrated by recipient communities. However, with state and international donor resources stretched thin, the food basket provided just three commodities: wheat flour, vegetable oil and pulses. Interestingly, as distributions got under way, and as recipient communities observed the school meal programme, a new phenomenon began to emerge: community members with any agricultural produce

to share, would deliver that produce to programme schools, while others would donate their time in the school kitchens in order to transform the children's mid-day school meals beyond the three WFP-provided commodities, into more palatable and nutritious soups and stews for the children. This humble, yet heroic, community-afforded addition to the school meals food basket would become the hallmark of the Armenian school meals intervention, and it is a tradition still very much alive today.

By 2004, the benefits of school meals, for those children that received it, were widely recognised, and the Armenian government was keen to expand school meal coverage. School headmasters and teachers could see that school meal activities were connected to improved school attendance among children in the most vulnerable regions.³⁰

In 2004, school meal coverage was increased by another 50 percent to cover almost 30,000 of the most vulnerable children in the border and mountainous areas and refugee-populated areas in the Shirak, Tavush, Lori and Gegharkunik provinces, where the highest levels of stunting in children were observed. These hot meals provided at school would have a positive impact on attendance rates, alleviate children's short-term hunger, and improve their concentration and learning capacities. Between 2004 and the first half of 2008, school meals were directed to children between ages 7 and 9 in the targeted schools, representing 49 percent of all children enrolled in grades 1–3 across the four regions, and 5,000 pre-schoolers between 3 and 6 years old. The programme placed a strong emphasis on gender equality, and 51 percent of beneficiaries were girls. Food amounting to 1,444 mt a year was provided for 176 school days. At that time, the daily hot meal to primary schoolchildren consisted of 250g of iron-fortified wheat flour, 40g of pulses and 10g of vitamin A-fortified vegetable oil; while pre-school children received a portion of porridge prepared from 120g of corn-soya blend, 10g of vegetable oil and 10g of sugar.

This period coincided with signs of a recovering Armenian economy. Unemployment gradually declined from roughly 12 percent in 2001 to approximately 6 percent in the first quarter of 2008,³¹ and the country's national gross domestic

product was up.³² Armenian gas, electricity and transportation infrastructure started functioning again, as post-Soviet states across Eurasia experienced a group-wide recovery. With the national outlook improving, the Armenian Government and WFP agreed to discontinue the protracted relief and recovery operation in 2009, after a decade of successful collaboration. However, what happened next would risk these ten years of progress, push the national economy back into decline and, ultimately, result in a new vision for the future of school meals.

Global downturn results in new momentum around school meals

Amid crisis, a timely commitment arrives and a new model takes shape

When the global economic crisis emerged between 2008 and 2009, Armenia was one of the countries to be hardest hit. The impact of the crisis was felt on multiple fronts, including a sharp decline in direct foreign investments; falling demand for Armenian commodity exports; and dwindling remittance inflows. In 2007, Armenia's GDP was growing at 13.7 percent, whereas in 2008 it dropped down to 6.9 percent and by 2009 the GDP was shrinking at -14.1 percent.³³ During the year 2009, the Armenian economy was estimated to have contracted by approximately 15.6 percent.³⁴ The resulting slowdown in growth and domestic and foreign investment led to significant job and income losses for Armenian citizens and gutted the government's tax base.

The impact of the economic crisis on development workplans implemented jointly by Armenia's government and international partners was highly significant. As a result of the major contraction, contributions from WFP's donors, necessary to fund Armenia's protracted

30 WFP. Standard Project Report Armenia, 2004.

31 Armenia Unemployment Rates, 2001-2008. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/armenia/unemployment-rate>

32 World Bank Group, GDP Growth in Armenia (annual %). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AM>

33 Ibid.

34 World Bank Group. The 2008–09 Global Economic Crisis, Policy Responses, and Household Coping Strategies. June 2010. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/728931468218417835/armenia-the-2008-09-global-economic-crisis-policy-responses-and-household-coping-strategies>

relief and recovery operation and school meals provisions, dropped precipitously, and, as a result, the joint operation was in great peril. By late 2008, closure plans were drafted for WFP's operation in Armenia, and school meals to the 30,000 children was discontinued during the 2008–2009 school year, when the operation had exhausted its resources.

As the Armenian government recognised the gravity of the situation, and deployed the limited tools at its disposal, the Government of the Russian Federation took increased interest in the former Soviet Republic, its regional partner on a variety of fronts. In response, Russia committed multi-year funding for the continuation of school meals in Armenia, in support of the Armenian Government, through WFP, and in close operational partnership with the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI). This commitment to Armenia's National School

Meal Programme arrived just in time to avert the shutdown of WFP operations.

When interviewed for this publication, Nanna Skau, WFP Deputy Country Director (current Country Director) said, *"We must give credit to the main donor, the Russian Federation, for their multi-year funding agreements and the work with SIFI on adaptive models...If we didn't have these multi-year agreements, we couldn't have accomplished so much."*

The Armenian and Russian Governments and WFP began working in close partnership to chart a new course for the future. Based on lessons learned, the aim would be to support the development of in-country management capacity, infrastructure and sustainable resources, resulting in a resilient, government-led, Armenian National School Meal Programme.





The global financial crisis and impacts on poverty, access to education and nutrition

The effect of the 2008–2009 financial crisis on poverty in Armenia was dramatic. The proportion of individuals living below the poverty line was estimated to have reached 28.4 percent in the second quarter of 2009, up from 25.6 percent in the same period one year earlier. The World Bank estimated that the poverty rate increased from 27.6 percent in 2008 to 35 percent in 2011.³⁵ The situation affected women and men differently, as economic hardship and absence of workplaces aggravated the trends of labour migration among men, while women were vulnerable as the primary caregivers to their children and assumed overall responsibility for maintaining their households. In the midst of these changes, the negative impact on the health and education of children in low-income families was significant. According to the 2010 Armenia Demographic and Health Survey,³⁶ stunting among children under five increased from 17 percent in 2000 to 19 percent in 2010. In seven of the country's 11 regions, stunting was above 20 percent and in some regions the prevalence climbed even higher.

School enrolment is compulsory in Armenia until the ninth grade, but there was a worrying increase in the number of children dropping out of school during this time (from 1,417 in 2003 to 7,534 in 2007). Inequalities in access to education

were a major concern: drop-out rates were higher in rural areas and among minority groups; enrolment rates were lower in rural areas; and rural residents were 1.8 times less likely to attend tertiary education than residents of urban areas. There were significantly lower enrolment rates for the poor population in high/upper secondary school and in preschools. A UNICEF case study conducted before the 2008 crisis found that student absenteeism was at 10 percent, attributable to poverty, frequent sickness and the need to look after livestock or undertake other household chores. The economic crisis made it even more difficult for children of poor parents to attend school regularly.

In 2009–2010, a series of studies, including the Rapid Assessment of the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis; a United Nations Survey on the Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis; and a Follow-up Rapid Assessment of the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis in Armenia, showed that food insecurity in Armenia had increased. The latter, carried out in February 2010, recommended, among other things, the resumption of school meals to secure child nutrition and development. According to data issued by the National Service of Statistics in Armenia in November 2013, 41.9 percent of children were living below the poverty line, against the national average of 35 percent.

³⁵ World Bank Group. Country Program Snapshot – Armenia, 2015. <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Armenia-Snap-shot.pdf>

³⁶ Armenia Government, Ministry of Health. Demographic and Health Survey, 2010. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR252/FR252.pdf>

The start of institutionalised school meals in Armenia

With the Russian Federation's funding and operational support from WFP, in 2010, the Armenian government began a new phase of school meals through a pilot activity targeting 12,000 primary schoolchildren in the Tavush and Gegharkunik provinces. The ten-year protracted relief and recovery operation had prioritised school meals, but services had been rendered directly by international partners to Armenian schools in food insecure regions of the country. In the new Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project, that began in 2010, the aim was to advance multiple objectives of equal importance, including not only the scaling up of school meals to reach more of Armenia's children, but also technical assistance to build Armenian government capacity to eventually transition externally administered school meals activities to the government. Unlike the previous school meals provision activity, this intervention underlined a whole new level of government ownership, responsibility and contribution, envisioning a gradual and full takeover of WFP school meal operations with a sustainable National School Meal Programme planned and funded from the national budget. The project document emphasised that capacity building to government would pave the way towards nationalisation of the programme.³⁷ These outcomes were well aligned with WFP's 2009 School Feeding Policy and Strategic Plan, which marked a shift away from the WFP being merely a food aid distributor and the start of it providing technical assistance to governments and making sure governments are taking the lead.

Under the broader agreement between WFP and the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, SIFI pledged continuing operational support to the school meals project. From 2010, SIFI and its technical advisers proved to be a valuable partner to the Armenian government and WFP, contributing to virtually all aspects and activities

related to capacity building and transition to nationalised school meals. Over time, SIFI led multiple studies and research projects, which have contributed to context-specific knowledge across safety nets, education, nutrition and local economies, creating an evidence base for programme design and interventions.

As the consortium – comprising of the Armenian government, SIFI and WFP – worked together to launch the new National School Meal Programme, a show of support arrived in late 2010 from the Israeli Agency for International Development Cooperation. The timing of Israel's contribution was important, as early meetings between consortium members had resulted in the Armenian government expressing serious concerns about its capability to commit to the administration or financing of school meals, considering the lingering economic hardship caused by the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. The Israeli government provided Armenia with the much-needed financial resources to hold its first partners' conference on school meals sustainability, in the capital of Yerevan, in early 2011. This conference resulted in fundamental planning, activity scheduling and affirmation of the Armenian government's commitment to the National School Meal Programme.

Very important during this period was direct engagement with the Armenian government's line ministries, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which had supported WFP's implementation of the protracted relief and recovery operation until its discontinuation in 2008, and MoESCS, which took the lead on behalf of the government from 2010. Ministry staff were sensitised to the importance of school meals, based on their personal observations in the field. Their dialogue with SIFI and WFP's technical advisers supported consensus-building and strengthened advocacy approaches to Armenian officials. As a result of this inter-agency dialogue, school meals champions emerged, and the Armenian government

³⁷ WFP. Development Project, Armenia, 2010. https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000025553

committed to funding school meals, with increasing allocations, through the national budget.

The year after the Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project began, in June 2011, the Armenian government and WFP signed a Development Project Action Plan, wherein the government recognised school meals as an effective safety net promoting long-term investment in human capital through improvements to nutrition, education, value transfers, gender equality, and more. An **Inter-Ministerial Working Group on School Feeding** was formed in 2011, under the Development Project Action Plan, chaired by the Deputy Minister of Education and represented by the Ministries of Education and Science, Labour and Social Affairs, and Agriculture. The working group was replaced later in the year by the **Inter-Ministerial Committee on School Feeding**, according to a decision of the Minister of Education, now including the Ministries of Territorial Administration, and Healthcare as well as WFP. The new Inter-Ministerial Committee was chaired by the head of the MoESCS Department for Development Programmes and Monitoring.

A national model and coordination mechanisms explored

At the beginning of the Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project, the daily ration for cooked school meals consisted of 210 grams of wheat flour, 10 grams of vegetable oil and 20 grams of pulses. The ration was updated, to include 180 grams, 15 grams and 30 grams respectively of these commodities, in line with the recommended caloric value for children attending half-day schools. As from the beginning of school meals being introduced in Armenia, parents continued to contribute to the school meals food basket with fresh vegetables, fruit, salt and fuel for cooking.

In comparison with 2008, as of 2012, the extreme

poverty rate had increased 1.8 times; the share of the very poor increased by 7.1 percent (or by 0.9 percentage points); and total poverty increased by 17.4 percent (or by 4.8 percentage points). With an average of 35 percent of the population living below the poverty line in 2012 (against 28.4 percent in 2009), 19.9 percent very poor and 3.7 percent extremely poor, the school meal operation remained highly relevant to nutritional needs. In the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, to provide diversification, buckwheat, rice and pasta were added to the school food basket.

By 2012, children supported by the school meal programme were provided with food five days a week, 180 days per year, with one of two modalities: hot meals and fresh bread in two-thirds of the schools, or fruit bars in the remaining one-third of schools. The selected modality depended on the availability of appropriate kitchen facilities in schools, with this information being determined primarily based on self-reported questionnaires completed by headteachers. Considering that a number of schools were unable to implement cooked meals due to the lack of appropriate kitchen facilities, with financial support from the Open Society Foundation, WFP introduced a dry school meal modality - the fruit bars - in the second semester of the 2011–2012 school year. These fruit bars were made by a local biscuit producer which used imported micronutrient-fortified wheat flour, together with locally made dry fruit, and delivered them to the participating schools.

The number of primary-level school meals beneficiaries increased over this period, up from 12,000 in 2010, to reach 50,000 schoolchildren with mid-day meals in 2012. In accordance with the 2011 Development Project Action Plan, the project was scheduled to end in June 2013. However, based on good progress, and promising initiatives further funded by the Israeli Development Agency, including the 2012 Healthy Eating Habits promotion project, and a series



of training events for capacity development at central, provincial and local levels, in November 2012, WFP approved the extension of the project until July 2016.

As the consortium continued to work on transitioning the National School Meal Programme to a government partner, in early 2013, it was decided to target 10,000 additional primary schoolchildren in three new provinces (Ararat, Vayots Dzor and Syunik) bringing the total to 60,000 schoolchildren in 800 schools in the most food-insecure areas of the country. In April of that year, WFP added a further 7,000 schoolchildren to the school meal programme. The increase in the number of beneficiaries brought the total to 67,000 schoolchildren, across approximately 900 schools at the beginning of the 2013–2014 school year. All Armenian provinces were now benefiting from the school meals intervention, except for the capital, Yerevan.

During the developments mentioned above, a group of representatives from the government's Ministries of Education and Agriculture, alongside WFP, participated in a workshop on School Feeding Systems in APEC Economies, organised by SIFI. Based on those discussions, and to advance government capacity building for school meals management, government coordination of the project was assigned to staff of the Centre of Educational Programmes Project Implementation Unit (PIU), which was situated in MoESCS. The aim was that PIU would emerge as an independent administrator of the school meals intervention by the end of the project. During the first year, PIU was to participate in the WFP-implemented project to acquire experience and, in the second year, it was anticipated that PIU staff would take up responsibility for project implementation in one of the provinces where WFP did not implement the programme. In subsequent years, if all went according to plan,

the responsibility of project implementation would gradually be transferred to PIU in all provinces, along with increased project funding from the national budget. However, at the time, PIU also held responsibility for an ongoing large-scale education reform project, with support from the World Bank, which would later affect PIU's ability to take on responsibility of school meals management.

Armenia begins building a school meals policy framework

Despite the commitment shown by the government, school meals had not yet been formally included among Armenia's national development priorities or policy frameworks, such as the Second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and the Programme for the Government of the Republic of Armenia 2014, or in the education section of the Armenia Development Strategy for 2014–2025.

To begin integrating school meals into national policy and planning, it was decided that before transitioning the National School Meal Programme, a strategy was needed to inform activities and underpin programme funding. As a first step towards development of the strategy, in 2012, the Armenian government produced a position paper titled, the Concept of Sustainable School Feeding. The Concept of Sustainable School Feeding was formulated in line with the main provisions of Armenia's Strategy for National Security (2007) and the Sustainable Development Programme (2008).

According to the 2012 statement from the Armenian government, "the aim of the Concept of Sustainable School Feeding is to create a sustainable school meals system enabling provision of healthy food to all primary school students in state-run general education schools

in Armenia.”³⁸ The government went further still, by validating the implementation and handover arrangements of the programme and articulating its readiness to gradually take over WFP functions, including food distribution, reporting, monitoring, partnerships and capacity strengthening.

The Concept of Sustainable School Feeding presented a highly favourable description of the school meals intervention as an effective safety net scheme “helping to protect children during crises, and providing multiple benefits in education, gender equality, food security, poverty reduction, and nutrition and health.” In building the case for introduction of a national programme, it also mentioned its role in stimulating the development of local agricultural production and presented a major government commitment to incremental caseload takeover. This resulted in a landmark publication called the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Action Plan and Pilot Projects, 2014–2016.³⁹

The Strategy detailed the following key steps:

- 1. Creating a comprehensive legal framework for school meals**, along with implementing measures, such as defining the responsibilities of the line ministries, territorial administrations and educational institutions; establishing mechanisms for the participation of local self-governance bodies and parents; incorporating funding for school meals in the appropriations to general education schools, including from extra-budgetary sources; and simplification of purchasing procedures from small local producers, e.g. advance payments for such purchases, etc.

- 2. Creating institutions responsible for implementation and management while improving their capabilities.** Programme coordination and work with donors would be undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Working Group, while overall responsibility for strategic implementation would lie with MoESCS. The latter would task its structural division to develop school meal policies and perform general programme coordination functions.
- 3. Piloting school meal delivery models.** The government would implement several micro-projects in 2014 integrated with the overall school feeding system, including (i) school milk; (ii) school-based cafeterias; (iii) small school bakeries; and (iv) small school farms.
- 4. Introducing mechanisms to draw extra-budgetary resources.** Efforts would be made to acquire funds from local and international donors for food procurement and school meals capacity development.
- 5. Parent and community participation** was seen as a major contributing factor to sustainability and effectiveness and would allow provision of hot meals and more balanced diets not only to students of elementary grades but also for higher grades. Parent contributions could be in-kind and cash as well as through their own labour.

Between them, the Sustainable School Feeding Concept and Strategy documents laid the groundwork for nationalisation of Armenia’s School Meal Programme. The Sustainable School Feeding Strategy aimed for the government takeover of the first school meals caseload from WFP in Vayots Dzor by 2016. The two documents were approved by the Prime Minister, in recognition of the Armenian government’s commitment to establishing a national programme.

38 World Bank Group & WFP. Armenia SABER Report 2016. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/215811500377537010/pdf/117563-WP-SABER-SHSF-Amenia-2016.pdf/>

39 Armenian Government. Resolution No.33 dated 22nd of August 2013 on “the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Plan of Activities, and Pilot Project” <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=85348>

Before the end of 2013, a programme milestone was achieved when a regional-level school meals coordination group was established in the Vayots Dzor province. According to the government's new model, these regional coordination groups would be expected to coordinate with community-level school management councils to oversee the school budget and expenditure determinations, including for school meals.

Learning exchange and preparation for the first transition to government

In 2014, with little more than two years before the first school meals caseload at Vayots Dzor province was to transition to MoESCS, SIFI organised a group study tour for its consortium

partners, the Armenian government and WFP, to the Russian cities of Moscow, Tambov and Saransk. The purpose of observing the Russian school meal interventions was to share knowledge and provide encouragement to officials from the Armenian MoESCS Structural Division who were then engaged in intensive capacity building ahead of the handover of school meals administration in Vayots Dzor.

Based in part on this learning exchange, in 2014, the Armenian government developed the Order of the Minister of Health on Hygiene Requirements for Food Provision to Students in General Education Schools. The Minister's directive served as guidance on food safety for general education institutions and for corporate entities involved in food provision to these schools.

Food safety for school meals

The 2014 Order of the Minister of Health on Hygiene Requirements for Food Provision to Students in General Education Schools aimed to ensure food safety, hygiene and sanitary procedures so that healthy and safe foods were reaching students. It established the responsibilities of the school headteacher; entities supplying food (including hot meals); the school health worker; and cooks regarding food management and safety. According to the order, the school headteacher maintains overall responsibility for overseeing compliance with the government's sanitary regulations. Meanwhile, the health worker performs a daily examination of the kitchen workers' health condition, which is formally certified every six months, and controls compliance with the requirements of food preparation and distribution to children. Finally, the entities providing food and hot meals to schools are responsible for their safety and quality, while nutritionists with MoESCS and WFP develop sample menus agreed upon with the school headteachers. Daily food samples are taken



by the cook, in the presence of a staff member designated by the headteacher. Through these coordinated steps, the programme fosters a participatory approach, marked by co-creation and co-delivery of meals by communities and partners, resulting in ownership at each level.

As the Armenian government worked to further enshrine the necessary management mechanisms ahead of the planned 2016 transition of the school meals caseload, a June 2015 Ministerial decree was announced, which formally established the Inter-Ministerial Working Group on school meals. The decree went on to describe the School Feeding Implementation Unit within MoESCS, which would be staffed with professionals oriented towards the administration of the new National School Meal Programme on behalf of the government.

When the caseload transition target date arrived, in early 2016, as foreseen in the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, the Armenian government and its partners, WFP and SIFI, initiated the caseload handover according to the sequence described in the 2013 Strategy. Activities and operations were transferred to the responsibility of the MoESCS Implementation Unit, which was to administer the seamless continuation of school meals in the Vayots Dzor, Syunik and Ararat provinces.

Almost immediately, it became evident that the transition had happened too quickly. The conditions that had been suitable for WFP pilots were not the same as those required by a national programme. Despite the work undertaken thus far, some schools still lacked kitchen and storage facilities, and equipment; and the cooks and staff involved in the programme lacked training in sanitation, hygiene and menu development. The food and sanitary inspections conducted in the target schools revealed suboptimal sanitation and hygiene conditions.

In response to these operational challenges, the handover effort was immediately suspended to ensure the continuity of safe and nutritious school meals to recipient children. Next, SIFI and

the MoESCS undertook a joint assessment of the schools in Vayots Dzor and Syunik provinces to identify the equipment needed and the kitchen and cafeteria repairs required for the safe preparation of hot meals, as well as access to clean drinking water. Over the remainder of 2016, WFP added funds to afford the recommended infrastructure upgrades executed in as many as 50 schools located in the target area. While the basic repairs were completed and kitchen equipment provided, the consortium provided schoolchildren with juice and fortified dried fruit bars. Concurrently, SIFI staff provided the training needed to headteachers working in the target schools on procurement, and to kitchen staff on food hygiene, preparation and sanitary practices.

The consortium's experience during the suspended 2016 school meals caseload handover provided key lessons on the importance of appropriate target-setting and time constraints, and joint planning with due consideration of personnel capacities, training, resources, physical settings and leadership. The experience also underscored the need to build stronger relationships and improved communication between national and subnational governments and WFP. Above all, this experience demonstrated to the consortium how a wise compromise, namely on mutually agreed adjustment towards a more moderate handover timeline, could be the best course of action. The lessons learned from this first phase of the school meals handover were expected to provide insights to verify the viability and scalability of the school meals handover to the government, and to make improvements, if needed, before the caseload and administration transitioned on a larger scale. Following this learning experience, the Armenian government, WFP and SIFI jointly developed a new package of capacity strengthening activities intended to lead to a much more resilient school meals system.

Government and stakeholders advance nationalisation of school meals

A clear-eyed approach to national systems strengthening

To address the challenges faced in the initial attempted transition of school meals to the government, jointly with WFP, SIFI undertook a thorough contextual analysis intended to identify better approaches to enhancing national capacity. Next, WFP commissioned an independent mid-term evaluation of the Development of Sustainable School Feeding project to take stock of the achievements to date and critical gaps remaining.⁴⁰ Based on the findings of the contextual analysis and mid-term evaluation, WFP revised its technical assistance strategy to better align its support with the specific challenges and needs of Armenia's programme and identify the best way to prepare solid ground for a sustainable transfer of the school meal programme.

Considering the takeaways from this experience, the Armenian government and its consortium partners, WFP and SIFI, formed a new agreement to invest in a transitional model structured around a set of elements representing strategic objectives, which aimed to strengthen MoESCS for the handover and administration of the national programme. Taken from the Handover Road Map, developed in 2016, the components are summarised below:

- Renovating and equipping school meal preparation facilities in schools.
- Shifting from in-kind commodity to cash-based transfers to schools.

- Piloting school agriculture projects.
- Providing financial and technical assistance to national institutions (central and decentralised levels and schools) responsible for post-transition programme management.
- Making progress towards an Armenian National School Meals Policy.

This approach, described in the road map, and the activities that followed contributed to better understanding of priorities and implementation arrangements, allowing greater government ownership, and for other relevant entities to emerge wiser and more prepared to facilitate the advancement of school meals, including the planned shift from direct food assistance to a National School Meal Programme delivered through a cash-based approach.

In February 2016, the government conducted a Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) exercise with support from WFP, the World Bank and Partnership for Child Development.⁴¹ According to the SABER report, "school meals in Armenia can be seen as moving toward a nationally maintained school meals program." However, multiple areas were identified as deficient and at the same time essential for implementation of the school meal programme and transition towards nationalisation. These included capacity building for national programme managers; transition to a cash-based modality; and renovation of school meals infrastructure. The roll-out of the SABER workshop was supported by MoESCS. A cross section of other relevant national actors for school meals, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, as well as regional administrations participated in the SABER.

40 WFP. Mid-Term Evaluation of the Development of Sustainable School Feeding project (2010-2016) <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/bc00af826c194b-4ba8dc74443ec946ad/download/>

41 World Bank Group & WFP. Armenia SABER Report 2016. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/215811500377537010/pdf/117563-WP-SABER-SHSF-Amenia-2016.pdf/>

As a result of the SABER exercise and recommendations, an action plan was developed and school meals were included in the national planning process. School meals were included in the government's Mid-term Expenditure Framework 2016–18 and referenced in the Education Development Programme, 2016–25. The SABER report noted that “low-hanging fruit” remained with respect to institutionalisation of school meals, highlighting that despite the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, there was not yet a national school meals policy or law.

In September 2016, Armenia hosted the 18th Global Child Nutrition Forum (GCNF), organised for the first time in South Caucasus. The event enhanced the country's contribution to the GCNF's South-South cooperation framework and enhanced the government's knowledge and understanding of school meals. Following the GCNF, the Armenian government further capitalised on the national momentum around school meals, establishing the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation, with dedicated staff and a portfolio of strategic initiatives aimed at institutionalising government functions in administering the school meal programme.

The government takes command of school meals

In 2017, following on from the GCNF, the government collaborated with WFP to update the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy. Starting in 2017, the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation was fully funded by WFP. More recently, the government committed to assuming the agency's operational costs through a phased transition. In 2019, the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation was restructured, becoming the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency, as it is known today.

Also in 2017, a significant shift occurred in the government's preferred approach to providing school meals for children. Previously, schools were solely responsible for organising the provision of school meals, with food items centrally procured and delivered by WFP. However, a new cash-based approach was introduced where schools assumed responsibility for procuring the food themselves.

A note on procurement for cash-based school meals

Since 2017, in Armenian schools where the cash-based school meals modality is applied, funds provided by the government or WFP are transferred through the National Treasury system to participating local banks, where schools have opened an account to receive the transfers. Food is then procured, individually by schools, through a tender prepared by school staff and parent committees. As required by the law, prices from at least three different bidders are compared. Food for school meals is sourced, according to public procurement procedures, directly from a list

of commodity retailers. If the value exceeds AMD 1,000,000 or approximately USD 2,530, a public request for quotations is required. Food is procured from the pre-identified list, constituting 20 food items. Through this modality, the Armenian National School Meal Programme provides children with at least 32 percent of their daily caloric need and 41 and 46 percent of their daily requirements for protein and fat, respectively. Under the cash-based modality, kitchen helpers receive cash incentives for preparation of school meals during the school year.

In 2017, the government introduced two annexes for the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, outlining new elements and approaches for school meals to guide the programme until 2024 with a focus on increasing national involvement and implementation. The annexes proposed expanding school meals in educational institutions over the 2017–2024 period, and assured government support for balanced, safe and quality food to pre-school and primary school students. The expansion would be phased, targeting provinces where WFP had supported improvements in kitchens, cafeterias and staff training. The annexes specified that funding for implementing school meals during this period would come from the national budget, supplemented by financial support from the Russian Federation. Additionally, the government and WFP would sign an updated handover road map, to guide the transition of functions and responsibilities from WFP to the government.

The Government of Armenia committed to taking over administrative and operational control of one province per year from the WFP portfolio. In 2014–2015 there had been an attempted handover of the Syunik, Vayots Dzor and Ararat provinces, after which gaps were noticed and the handovers were paused. The planned sequence for subsequent handovers was Tavush in 2017, Shirak in 2018, Aragatsotn in 2019, Gegharkunik in 2020, Lori in 2021 and Armavir and Kotayk in 2022 with extra support to Vayots Dzor and Syunik to cover the gaps. By 2024–25, the programme aimed to extend coverage to Yerevan, reaching a total of 147,000 beneficiaries, covering 100 percent of eligible Armenian children nationwide.

The 2017 annexes prescribed a straightforward, government-wide approach that involved MoESCS, and the Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Finance, Territorial Administration and Development, and Labour and Social Affairs.

Not long after, Armenia's Ministry of Health announced its official Order on the Approval of Sanitary Rules and Norms for Educational

Institutions that Implement General Education Programmes, which had its origins in the 2016 review of critical gaps and was aimed at the prevention of health hazards for schoolchildren and school staff. The order laid down sanitation and hygiene requirements for the National School Meal Programme and applied to all educational institutions implementing general education programmes. The order also laid down the technological requirements for school cafeterias, citing an order of the Ministry of Urban Development, which defines rules for these aspects from a planning and design perspective.

A cash-based school meals success arrives at Tavush province

The first successful transition from WFP to the Government of Armenia and its School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency occurred in February 2017, when the Tavush Province was successfully handed over from the WFP school meals portfolio. The shift to the cash-based school meals procurement modality in Tavush covered all primary schoolchildren in the province: 7,600 children across 74 schools, where WFP had administered school meals through an in-kind model since 2010.

Before introducing the cash-based transfer modality in Tavush, WFP carried out assessments of the market, retail trade and banking system. The results pointed to the high suitability of a cash-based school meals modality due to a developed retail sector that could provide enough food to the schools, and the availability of banking services within the coverage area. Ahead of the transfer, the government, and its partners, WFP and SIFI, worked with the Marzpetaran Provincial Authority of Tavush to formulate an agreement, which featured the cash-based transfer modality, along with programme funding allocation plans, and monitoring and reporting templates.

To ensure the quality and sustainability of the programme, before the handover, WFP worked with the Armenian government to

conduct assessments of individual schools' infrastructure and provision of repair materials for the improvement of school meals-related infrastructure and kitchen equipment; training for all headteachers in the province, combining a wide array of topics including procurement, financial reporting, food safety, food storage, hygiene and sanitation; and policy advice and technical assistance to augment the government's capacity. The engagement also included mobilization of partners such as the Marzpetaran (the regional administration), United Nations Development Programme and NGOs, which resulted in additional financial support for the improvement of school infrastructure ahead of the transition of the caseload in February 2017.

In 2017, headteachers and parents in Tavush gave high priority to buying local products, and reported that, "nearly 90 percent of the money disbursed by schools is spent on products that are locally produced or at least processed/ packaged in Armenia." Structured interviews and an online survey found "an increased sense of ownership by headteachers and parents over the programme ... headteachers and parents feel they have more 'control' and work more closely together to take decisions, e.g. on the types of

commodities to be purchased or meal plans." However, challenges remained. For example, headteachers reported that their working hours had "increased significantly" due to their added responsibility under the cash-based programme.

Despite this, the full range of community stakeholders in Tavush reported that they were highly satisfied with the increase in food variety and the heightened transparency and governance arising from the cash-based school meals process. This outcome was supported by WFP investments in strengthening the capacity of school-level committees and headteachers in procurement processes, which, according to the schools and line ministries, enhanced overall procurement skills at local level.

By introducing cash-based transfers to schools for procurement of locally grown commodities, and thereby providing opportunities to introduce fresh, diverse produce in school meals, the Armenian government and WFP aimed to establish the foundations of a sustainable home-grown school meal programme which would have the added benefit of linking smallholder farmers to the dependable institutional school meals market. However, the involvement of local smallholders has at times proven difficult to achieve.

Procuring from smallholders

Currently, direct involvement of smallholders is allowed by the law, but the requirements of the same law limit their involvement. First, all tender participants, regardless of their type, must be registered as a private enterprise, which obligates them to pay taxes; second, farmers need to have a product certificate from the Food Safety Service of the Ministry of Agriculture,⁴² which is quite costly to obtain. Conversely, commodity retailers maintain product certificates and labelling, and buy directly from farmers that have no certificates.

With the support of WFP, the Armenian government is working on the resolution of this inconsistency in the law, and to introduce privileged conditions for smallholder farmers (such as reducing taxes and reducing the price of product certificates) which would enable them to become private enterprises and participate in school meal tenders. Transportation and storage may be another impediment for many smallholders. Therefore, the bulk of food for school meals has been, until now, purchased from retailers.

⁴² The Ministry of Agriculture no longer exists, the agriculture portfolio now falls under the authority of the Ministry of Economy in Armenia.

A change of government yields new school meals champions.

In 2018, the newly appointed government and the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency, continued their cooperation with WFP and other NGOs, and worked to advance and promote school meal transition plans and the 2017 annexes of the Sustainable School Feeding Strategy.

Multi-year releases of additional financing and extensions in time, granted to the Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project gave WFP the capability to refresh commitments to supporting Armenian government efforts on school health and nutrition, with the strategic aim to provide children with a nutritious school meal to enhance their ability to learn, and access nutrition knowledge contributing to the improvement of their dietary behaviour to fulfil their full potential and contribute to human capital development of the country.

Around 2018-2019, as part of the Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project, a nutrition-sensitive trial took place where children were given a small snack at the beginning of the school day in three provinces (Lori, Gegharkunik and Shirak), selected on the basis of poverty and the prevalence of anaemia. The key findings from the impact evaluation of the nutrition-sensitive aspect of the Development of Sustainable School Feeding Project, showed that “Processing speed, fluid reasoning, and short term memory scores increased significantly among children from families with lower expenditure and lower maternal education,” and that, “Overall findings demonstrate that the morning snack programme is important and needed for Armenian context,” and that, “Due to its tangible positive effect on less advantaged children, the morning snack programme can be scaled up.”⁴³

On this foundation of cooperation and support to the Armenian people, the scale-up of management capacity development and augmentation activities delivered by WFP began in earnest in the first six months of 2018. The second provincial school meals caseload – at Shirak – was transferred to the Armenian National School Meal Programme, during the 2018 academic year. Soon after, at the start of 2019, the third planned province, Aragatsotn, was transitioned to the government’s school meals portfolio. Interestingly, in addition to school meals, the transition of the programme to the government marked the transformation of a meals intervention into a community-based and owned platform promoting the circular economy, sustainable agriculture and green energy, behaviour change, healthy lifestyles, as well as delivering continued investments in communities – all to support and enhance human capital development.

WFP’s Armenia Country Strategic Plan for 2019–2024 was developed in close consultation with the government and its line ministries. Among other activities, it detailed the sustainable handover of a comprehensive nutrition-sensitive and gender-transformative school meal programme. From July 2019 onwards, WFP’s partnership and cooperation with the Armenian government was affirmed through their Letter of Understanding for the implementation of the Armenia Country Strategic Plan, 2019–2024. The agreement was “broad ranging in order to allow for the efficient and flexible provision of World Food Programme support, both in foreseen and unforeseen situations”; and addressed “many different potential activities, even if these activities are not currently envisioned in the Country Strategic Plan.”

43 WFP. Impact evaluation of the nutrition-sensitive aspect of the “Development of Sustainable School Feeding” Project in Armenia 2018-2019. www.wfp.org/publications/evaluation-nutrition-sensitive-aspect-development-sustainable-school-feeding%E2%80%9D-project-armenia

In mid-2019, MoESCS and WFP completed and affirmed the Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme 2019–2023, to guide the programme period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2023. The Road Map was a strategic plan for the transition of the ongoing school meal programme to the point of complete handover, and presented actions agreed between MoESCS and WFP, which aimed to strengthen communities and the government's institutional capacity, so that the Armenian National School Meal Programme could keep moving forward after full transfer of the school meals caseload to the government.

Considering the complexity of the transition preparation process, and the complex profile of the school meal programme itself, the road map defined three distinct types of handovers:

- **Full handover:** School infrastructure improvement works have been completed, cash-based transfer modality training delivered and programme funding handed over to the state budget.
- **Partial handover:** WFP is finalising renovations and/or provision of equipment in the schools where major construction works (by the government) started at a later stage (phase II) due to various limitations.
- **Handover of school agricultural projects:** Establishment of orchards or green houses has been completed and the sites are fully equipped including with solar panels, and training on nutrition and agriculture completed.

With the gradual handover, all ten provinces were planned to be under the national programme by 2023. The road map assigned roles and responsibilities to the various stakeholders, including the government (to ensure effective

programme operation and sustainability); WFP/School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency/Territorial Administration Bodies and communities (to facilitate nationalisation of the programme, each in their own areas of activity/competence); and schools (to continue implementation of the programme including the school agriculture schemes). The road map articulated the primary stakeholders' tasks and milestones by years – 2021, 2022 and 2023.

According to the plan, MoESCS would ensure the approval of a National Sustainable School Feeding Strategy and its integration into the general education strategy; and ensure the development of a National School Meals Monitoring and Evaluation Platform, its integration into the national Educational Information Management System and its proper operation. Monitoring included tracking attendance, menus, portions, food handling and cooking, procurement, quality checks and financial reporting. Finally, MoESCS was to initiate and lead discussions on Transformative School Feeding (described in detail, below) at parliamentary, ministerial and territorial levels to sensitise stakeholders on handover planning.

The handover timeline was developed together with MoESCS, based on the ministry's capacity to increase its caseload. Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, WFP delayed the handover of school meal programmes in two provinces, considering the emergent situation and understanding the additional financial and operational challenges faced by the government. After the handover, the plan was for WFP to continue to support the programme by providing technical assistance to partners at national, territorial and community levels; and to cover context-specific and unmet needs, with the aim of ensuring the sustainability of the National School Meal Programme's mid and long-term outcomes.



Recent developments of the Armenian School Meal Programme

COVID-19: A test of resilience for Armenia's National School Meal Programme

At the beginning of 2020, the world, Armenia included, found itself dealing with a new, unprecedented challenge – the COVID-19 pandemic – which forced many countries to shut down schools. As concerned parties with a stake in the success of Armenia's National School Meal Programme, and more broadly, in children's well-being, MoESCS, together with WFP and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, jointly addressed primary students' continuing food needs when the Armenian government took the decision to close all schools due to the spread of COVID-19 in March 2020. At the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year, alternative take-home rations, replacing on-site school meals, were provided to over 102,000 schoolchildren nationwide, by the government and WFP, who successfully partnered on development and implementation of such shock-responsive models. Another responsive school meals intervention at the time was a two-month cash transfer (USD 24 per child) to the guardians of over 26,000 primary schoolchildren from vulnerable families, helping to ensure their continuous access to food while studying at home. Children from the most vulnerable families were identified by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, with whom WFP worked closely, while the shock-responsive school meals intervention was being planned and implemented.

Amid rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country during 2021, schools remained closed most of the time, and again, alternative take-home rations covering children's food needs for

the second semester were provided. To mitigate the suffering of children from families displaced due to the 2020 conflict over the Nagorno-Kharabakh territory, WFP extended the operation to cover over 1,500 primary schoolchildren enrolled in Armenian schools. At the same time, despite the suspension of on-site school meals, WFP provided in-kind assistance to just over 1,300 kitchen helpers, often women from poor households and female heads of households, to help them meet their basic food needs as the pandemic continued.

National schools reopened to children in mid-October 2021. In November, WFP provided food to all schools in Armavir, Kotayk and Lori – the only three provinces where the school meal programme had not yet been transferred to the government. While access to school meals for schoolchildren continued through this period in the form of take-home rations and provision extensions for displaced children as described above, the effects of the military escalation at the border areas, combined with the spread of COVID-19 in Armenia over the same period, impacted the operational context of providing school meals and the implementation timeline, causing a setback in planned activities and transitions to government. In addition, special instructions issued by the Ministry of Health to deal with local COVID-19 outbreaks, also created disruptions in the provision of school meals.

During COVID-19, 800,000 USD was leftover due to irregular school meals implementation. As a sign of its enduring commitment to school meals, the Armenian Government reallocated this leftover funding to renovate kitchens, cafeterias and other vital school infrastructure. To mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on the processes

and quality of school meals, WFP and SIFI initiated widescale refresher training in all provinces, intensive monitoring visits and oversight missions to schools. WFP and SIFI worked with the directors and kitchen staff to reintroduce adequate infrastructure and food safety in school kitchens and canteens essentially re-establishing and enabling the recovery of school meals provision in Armenia.

Recent developments in the institutional set-up

The government's creation of a specialised School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency, which is guided by the Ministry of Education, highlights the Armenian government's commitment to promote school meals and is therefore one of the most important steps of institutionalisation of the National School Meal Programme. In 2020, the government's School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency (SFCWA) Charter was published, to set the course and expectations on the agency's role and responsibilities. The charter reads:

"The goal of SFCWA is to promote quality education by improving the learners' health and social protection through the Sustainable School Feeding Programme (SNSMP). The main purpose of SFCWA is to ensure capacity building necessary for the provision of healthful food to learners and development of a healthy lifestyle as well as the provision of good conditions of kitchen facilities, school buildings, property and equipment in the frame of the SNSMP. SFCWA has a wide range of objectives, from institutional capacity building to developing/introducing self-financing, cost-sharing and extra-budgetary funding mechanisms, to monitoring of SNSMP and providing training to all engaged in the programme – teachers, food service workers and parent councils in schools, local self-government, territorial and central administration staff."

The School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency Charter, and the handover of the last externally supported school meals caseload to the government, represents the culmination of efforts on school meals that began between the Armenian government and WFP as early as 1993.

During 2021, in cooperation with WFP, regional administrations and provinces organised a series of donor conferences, fundraising and networking events, resulting in 94 percent of schools in Gegharkunik and 100 percent of schools in Lori receiving additional private investments to improve their kitchen infrastructure, thus ensuring a smooth transition to the National School Meal Programme. These conferences showcased the government's commitment to raise funding for the National School Meal Programme, enhance stakeholder contributions and scout out more partners. WFP strengthened its engagement with local and international NGOs through field level agreements to efficiently implement activities. Additionally, WFP collaborated with the Asian Development Bank to optimise school renovations ahead of the transition.

Many milestones have been reached over the past few years in terms of Armenia's food systems. One important milestone in 2022 was the Government of Armenia's approval of a National Food Security Strategy developed by the Ministry of Economy with support from WFP. The National School Meal Programme and school-based agricultural food value chain projects are included in the strategy's action plan as a measure to provide food security to schoolchildren. The government requested that WFP support update of the School Meals Strategy to reflect the scale and complexity of the programme; scope future pathways for development and expansion; and recognised that school meals should be available for all learners. To prepare for the final transfer of school meals in Yerevan to the National School Meal Programme, SIFI completed a 2022 assessment



of school infrastructure in Yerevan, to be followed by an assessment of beneficiary (parent) perceptions about the imminent school meal programme. Finally, MoESCS and WFP signed an updated Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme in June 2022, setting out their mutually agreed transition plan and timeline. The road map is aimed at community strengthening and ensuring the government's institutional capacity to sustain the national programme after nationalisation. It is a huge success that programme management in provinces is being handed over, step by step. The holistic approach the government has adopted in taking over school meals highlights the relevance of the programme for the government and its commitment to it.

Official final handover and providing for children affected by conflict

Finally, in July 2023, the Armenian Government fully took over the implementation of all school meal operations from WFP and other partners.

The Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Armenia, Zhanna Andreasyan, emphasised the significance of completing full nationalisation of the programme as planned. "Since January 2023, more than 100,000 children in grades 1 to 4 across the ten provinces of the Republic of Armenia have been receiving food funded by the state budget. We express our intention to expand the programme to include schools in the capital city of Yerevan, potentially benefiting an additional 50,000 children," she said.

In more recent developments, as a result of the escalation of the decades-long conflict in the Nagorno-Kharabakh region, in late 2023, the Government of Armenia reported that between 24 September and 4 October 2023, over 101,848 persons had arrived in the country from the Nagorno-Kharabakh region, of which 48,964 are men; 52,884 are women; 9,000 are people with disabilities; 12,000 are elderly (65 years or above); and 30,000 are children. According to MoESCS, as of 20 October 2023, 15,424 refugee children have been enrolled in the schools in Armenia.

The capacity of national school meals has been stretched to provide for the increased number of children in primary grades. For many of these children, a hot meal in school serves as their primary source of nutrients, given that displaced families continue to face challenges related to housing, food shortages, medication and the need for warm clothing. This further proves the flexibility of the National School Meal Programme and how it can truly act as a safety net for the most vulnerable.

Transformative approach to school meals

Not only has the Government of Armenia shown its dedication to managing the National School Meal Programme, it has also decided to invest in a truly transformative approach which has far-reaching positive impacts for the community. The Government of Armenia, supported by WFP, has made it a priority to promote a self-reliant and adaptive model of school meals called Transformative School Meals to enhance the quality of education and to ensure that schools are resilient and have the capacities and resources to run school meals on their own, regardless of crises and challenges. As stated by MoESCS:

“The transformative component of school meals (intensive gardens, solar panels, school -adjacent greenhouses), is considered as a component that supports and complements the educational process, in particular, through the development of extra-curricular activities, project training, agro-entrepreneurial and professional orientation groups. At the same time, it is important that these schools are able to cover the costs of school meals and diversify the menus with the funds generated from these transformative components.”

The fundamental idea is to create more transformative change by using schools and school meals as a platform for education and development of the community, job creation and distribution of knowledge and skills on climate-smart agricultural practices as well as healthy

lifestyles. While contributing to school meals and learning relevant business practices, children and community members can also generate profits to reinvest back into the schools and communities which contributes to the resilience of these communities and the sustainability of school meals with the end goal of contributing to human capital development, the health of the population and stimulating the green development of the country. In consultation with the government, WFP and SIFI designed various transformative self-financing school meal models which are explained below:

Model 1. Across the country, WFP has supported 51 schools to construct greenhouses, plant berry gardens and intensive orchards that are producing seasonal fruits and vegetables to contribute to school meals. To improve nutrition education and habits among schoolchildren, training and presentations are delivered both to children and school staff. Not only do these food resources contribute to a more varied and nutritional diet, but the facilities serve as demonstrative learning centres for community members, showcasing modern cost-effective agricultural practices, such as cultivation of high-value crops, intensive orchards, efficient water and soil management, anti-hail nets, hydroponic greenhouses, use of organic fertilisers and composting. These inputs were provided by WFP, with SIFI acting as a technical adviser. The schools have the potential to provide agricultural extension services involving training, guidance and technical assistance for their communities, of which there is a need in Armenia. One of the key elements in this model is the WFP-provided solar stations installed in schools, which have a total capacity of 2,371kW, saving 3,437,950 kW on electricity each year. Solar stations provided to 97 schools with extra savings of USD 339,772 annually, create new opportunities for the schools to invest in other educational and school meal-related needs. Investing in schools and enhancing the quality of education in this way leads to a stronger, more resilient and more prosperous community, in addition to an annual



reduction of carbon emissions by 1,237 mt of carbon dioxide.

Model 2. The “Arpi” community development model, named after the first community to implement it, also provides assets such as solar panels and farming and agriculture equipment to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), smallholder farmers, schools and communities. SMEs received these assets to increase their productivity and profitability, of which 30 percent of their profits were then given to a Community Development Foundation which monitored the return on investments and oversaw and took decisions on the investment back into local school meal programmes in vulnerable settlements of the Arpi community. The Community Development Foundation ensures total community ownership of the programme and has a formal governance structure, including a Supervisory Board, Fund Charter and Regulations. WFP and SIFI provided guidance and technical support in the first year of the Foundation’s existence but, from then on, the Foundation was solely responsible for maintaining the school meal programme.

Enhancing the capacity of SMEs and linking them with school meals has already led to a more varied diet for children, adding various foods to school menus such as eggs, cheese

sourced from a local farmer at no cost, as well as being able to buy other food items such as bananas. Additionally, the Arpi community has been able to support six local vulnerable schools (which were not included in the school meal programme due to the small number of children of primary grades) with hot meals and infrastructure improvements (renovation of kitchen facilities, provision of kitchen equipment and utensils). The success of this model has led to a new level of integrating social responsibility approaches in WFP’s food system development projects, strengthening the connection between businesses, communities and schools, thereby promoting social, economic and environmental well-being through social cohesion.

WFP has provided training, technical support and resources to build the skills and knowledge needed to effectively implement the National School Meal Programme and hand it over to national institutions, schools, communities and other actors involved. In addition to building technical capacities, all activities integrate social behaviour change methodologies, including community participation in school meals initiatives; co-creation of transformative school meal models; commercial school meal models for children in higher grades funded by parents; and nudging for improved nutrition behaviours.

To push for behaviour change among households and communities, WFP, jointly with the government, promoted healthy nutrition choices by using nudging strategies to influence food purchase decisions, household consumption patterns and food sharing. The National School Meal Programme offers opportunities for nutrition education and social behaviour interventions, engaging children in cooking classes, promoting local and traditional food, and raising awareness of healthy eating habits and physical activity. To this end, UN agencies were tasked to develop a healthy lifestyle curriculum for grades 5–9. WFP was responsible for the nutrition and physical activity part of the healthy curriculum. Using behavioural methods of teaching, the new curriculum was developed to be fun and interactive, engaging the learners, their families and school staff. In 2022, 3,486 people were reached through special training sessions, educational events and co-creation activities. In addition, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, nationwide campaigns promoting healthy lifestyles, healthy eating and aging were organised.

With support from WFP, the government continued to promote local procurement of wholegrain wheat to supply to schools under the National School Meal Programme. WFP helped to develop a comprehensive approach to building wholegrain value chains and integrate wholegrain flour products in school meals. For example, in Lori and Tavush provinces, seven bakeries were supported with baking equipment and solar energy systems and several bakeries participated in skill-building training. As a result, 15,100 children (54 percent boys and 46 percent girls) in Lori and Tavush provinces saw more nutritious wholegrain wheat bread replacing white wheat bread in their school meals.

All these fundamental principles such as the circular economy, nutrition sensitivity, local production procurement, clean and green energy, transparency and accountability, and shared implementation responsibility with government, schools and parents, enhance the resilience and self-sufficiency of the programme.



Future outlook for the Armenia National School Meal Programme

The next steps for Armenia's National School Meal Programme are to develop a National Strategy and action plan for nationwide school meals. This includes developing proper legal and financial frameworks to:

"Promote innovative and transformative school meals models, including urban school meals, that contribute to quality of education and healthy lifestyles through sustainable agriculture, circular economy, development of local communities and green learning practices, so that by 2030 school meals and adequate nutrition knowledge are available to every school aged child in the Republic of Armenia" as described by MoESCS.

The Sustainable School Feeding Programme Handover Road Map lays out the vision of how the government will manage all school meals in the future, including infrastructure development and maintenance, adapting transformative models with school gardens and greenhouses, food processing, bakeries, renewable energy, revolving models, linking farmers and food producers to schools and markets, diversifying school meals and generating new job opportunities. The aim is to keep expanding these transformative approaches to build sustainability and resilience of the school meal programmes at a local level and therefore also contribute to overall resilience of the community. As part of this transformative model, school meals will contribute to revitalising and improving community knowledge and education around agricultural practices, contributing not only to vocational education, but also more sustainable food systems.

The aim is to ensure that every Armenian child will receive a well-balanced and nutritious meal in

school; therefore the focus will be on improving the diversity of meals as well as engaging in social and behaviour change activities to ensure healthy and sustainable dietary habits of children in the future. The commitment to improved nutrition is reflected in the drafting of the School Feeding Strategy, as stated by the MoESCS:

"The strategy, among other issues, will also address the issues of healthy nutrition, both as a component of the program and in the form of a subtopic of the course on healthy lifestyle not excluding the possibility of cooperation with the RA Ministry of Health."

There are some challenges that the Armenian government may face regarding the National School Meal Programme in the years to come; for example, the global increase in the price of food commodities. The government and local communities will have to ensure adequate funding and identify ways of adapting menus while still maintaining their variety and nutritional value. The Armenian government is well aware of the challenge and is ready to take demonstrated measures to tackle unexpected spikes in food prices as described by MoESCS below:

"So far, in order to solve the mentioned problem, a review of 120 AMD allocated for food was carried out, making it 151 AMD (increasing the amount of total expenses for one child to 171 AMD), in accordance with the order No. 04-N of January 26, 2022, of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. The problem exists and if necessary, it will be solved again in the future."

This transformative model with a circular economy approach provides some resilience to price spikes as communities will have savings

from their activities that will then act as a temporary mitigation measure. In Armenia, the idea of a sustainable school meal programme has been taken a step further. Instead of simply transitioning the school meal programme to the government, the aim is to create true resilience within communities: the more self-reliant communities are, the less susceptible they are to global economic and price volatility, which also affects national governments. MoESCS also emphasises the relevance of building partnerships with various actors, such as regional administrations, and private and public entities to enhance the programme's implementation arrangements:

"Of course, the SFCWA has been established, which has a mission to support the ministry in monitoring, but in order to have a stable monitoring system, it is equally important that the territorial administration bodies (marzpetarans) are also armed with the necessary resources, capabilities, and legal basis for monitoring." the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports reflected.

The Armenian government is not only investing in infrastructure and the renovation of school kitchens and canteens but is also looking towards strengthening its digital infrastructure to find digital solutions to enhance monitoring of school meal programmes. This will enable accurate data collection and evidence generation, which can in turn contribute to improved management, accountability and quality of school meal programmes.



Conclusion

Despite facing many challenges over the past decades ranging from natural disasters and conflict to global financial shocks and pandemics, Armenia has shown its commitment to children's education and well-being by investing in school meals. Since Armenian independence, as a response to chronic malnutrition among children, the provision of school meals restarted in 2001, with the help of WFP. By 2004, the benefits of school meals, for those children that received it, were widely recognised, and the Armenian government was keen to expand school meal coverage. However, dwindling international funds for school meals and the global financial crisis of 2008 hit Armenia hard, but also highlighted the importance of continuing school meals and the necessity of developing a sustainable way to maintain the programme.

Thanks to multi-year funding enabling the continuation of school meal operations and long-term planning, WFP and development partners started working more closely with various Armenian ministries including MoESCS, Ministry of Labour and Social Services and Ministry of Agriculture, among others, to ensure sustainability. Various joint plans, concepts and strategies were drafted together, and the first inter-ministerial school meal coordination committees were formed to establish the aims to build up and transition a sustainable school meals system, enabling the provision of healthy food to all primary school students in state-run general education schools in Armenia. After a suspended handover attempt in 2016, the government and development partners conducted analyses and evaluations to understand the gaps and learn from the experience.

As a result of these reports and the SABER exercise, a Handover Road Map was developed which included concrete plans on renovating and equipping kitchens in schools; shifting to cash-

based transfers; providing technical assistance to national institutions (central and decentralised levels and schools); and finally making progress towards an Armenian National School Meals Policy.

The formation of the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency during the beginning of COVID-19 was one of the most important steps in institutionalisation of the National School Meal Programme. However, the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools during 2020 and 2021 resulting in school meals being distributed in the form of take-home rations and provision extensions for displaced children as well as support being provided for women who had been working as cooks in schools. The effects of the military escalation at the border areas, combined with the spread of COVID-19 in Armenia over the same period, slowed planned activities and transitions to government. However, the Armenian government's commitment to school meals was unwavering and it reallocated unused funds to renovate kitchens and cafeterias. Once schools reopened, refresher training was initiated in all provinces as well as intensive monitoring visits and oversight missions to schools.

Learning from the past, the Armenian government, with the help of its partners, has also taken steps in new, innovative ways to enhance the quality of education and to ensure that schools are resilient and have the capacities and resources to run school meals on their own regardless of crises and challenges.

In adopting circular economy school meals models, the fundamental idea is to not only enhance national and local ownership of the school meal programme but also create more transformative change by using schools and school meals as a platform for education and development of the community, job creation and distribution of knowledge and skills on climate-



smart agricultural practices and healthy lifestyles. Partners have worked hard to push for behaviour change among households and communities, for example, promoting healthy nutrition choices by using nudging strategies to influence food purchase decisions, household consumption patterns and food sharing.

Armenia is well on track to build a sustainable and resilient National School Meal Programme with strong commitment and engagement from the government and involvement from the local provinces. Many countries can learn from the way Armenia has centred communities and their needs in its quest to not only provide school meals to improve the education and well-being of children but to use school meals as a platform to leverage wider transformative system change.

Key lessons learned:

- Multi-year funding from the donor (the Russian Federation) was crucial in allowing more long-term planning of school meal operations.
- Involvement of a technical skilled partner (SIFI), which together with WFP, continued to improve and refine school meal models and led to enhanced community development and ownership.
- Working in direct collaboration with government ministries was key to ensuring school meal operations were in alignment with government priorities and enabled the transitioning of school meal operations to be planned with the government, which should be the goal.
- Establishing direct lines of communication with relevant ministries responsible for education, social security and agriculture was necessary to work on joint plans and strategies for a National School Meal Programme, which is an inherently cross-sectoral venture. Inter-ministerial coordination teams were crucial to managing school meals in a holistic way and to acquire adequate funding.



- Engagement and buy-in from high-level champions was pivotal, e.g. the Prime Minister of Armenia approved the School Feeding Concept and Strategy recognising the Armenian government's commitment to establishing the national programme.
- Situational and context analyses, SABER exercises and evaluations were necessary to understand previous errors and gaps, which in turn helped to create a better National School Meal Programme. The regular review and update of flexible handover plans was also key to continued progress, despite setbacks and changes.
- Ensuring skills, resources and good management of school meal operations at both central and decentralised levels was key for successful National School Meal Programme operations. This required investment in physical infrastructure such as kitchen and storage facilities and equipment; and capacity building, especially at decentralised levels such as province and school level.
- Working more closely at decentralised government level and with communities, appropriate target-setting and gradual handover plans with concrete steps are necessary for successful transition of school meal operations. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the transition process is not linear, requires flexibility and time, as well as regular reviews and changes in plans.
- A committed budget from the government is necessary to ensure continuity, but community resilience can and should be built up by providing resources and inputs for communities to create their own revenue to invest back into school meals and communities when needed.
- Social behaviour change interventions and rigorous monitoring and evaluation arrangements are needed to ensure the sustainability and quality of school meals in the long term.

Timeline of School Meals in Armenia

- 1991** | Armenia gained independence.
- 1998** | Joint Nutritional Survey between UNICEF and WFP revealed poor variety and quality of food.
- 2001** | The Armenian Government and WFP reinstated school meals. Daily school meals were served to 20,000 primary school children in two provinces.
- 2004** | School meals coverage was increased to almost 30,000 including children in the border and mountainous areas and refugee-populated areas in the Shirak, Tavush, Lori and Gegharkunik provinces.
- 2008** | Armenia was heavily hit by the global economic crisis. Due to financial constraints, WFP drafted closure plans for its operations in Armenia.

Russia committed multi-year funding via WFP and technical support via the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI) enabling school meals provision to continue.
- 2010** | The new “Development of Sustainable School Feeding” Project started with a pilot activity targeting 12,000 primary school children in the Tavush and Gegharkunik provinces. The project also included capacity strengthening support for the Armenian Government.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports took over from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to manage school meals.
- 2011** | Armenia’s first partners’ conference on school meals sustainability organised in Yerevan. Armenian Government committed to a National School Meal Programme.

The Armenian Government and WFP signed a Development Project Action Plan. Under the action the plan an Inter-Ministerial Working Group on School Feeding was formed and replaced soon after by an Inter-Ministerial Committee on School Feeding.
- 2012** | The Armenian government produced a position paper, the Concept of Sustainable School Feeding. In this document the Government validated the implementation and handover arrangements of the school meals programme and articulated its readiness to gradually take over WFP functions, including food distribution, reporting, monitoring, partnerships and capacity strengthening.
- 2012** | 50,000 schoolchildren were reached with mid-day meals.
- 2013** | The Sustainable School Feeding Strategy, Action Plan and Pilot Projects, 2014-2016 was finalised. The strategy detailed the plan to transition school meals to the Government by 2016.

School meals coverage was increased to three new provinces (Ararat, Vayots Dzor and Syunik). In total, 67,000 schoolchildren, across approximately 900 schools were receiving school meals.
- 2014** | SIFI organised an educational group study tour to the Russian cities of Moscow, Tambov and Saransk. Based in part on this learning exchange, the Armenian government developed the Order of the Minister of Health on Hygiene Requirements for Food Provision to Students in General Education Schools.
- 2015** | A Ministerial decree was announced, which formally established the Inter-Ministerial Working Group on school meals.

The Armenian government and its partners, WFP and SIFI, initiated the handover as planned in the Strategy. Activities and operations were transferred to the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (at the time), which was to administer the seamless continuation of school meals in the Vayots Dzor, Syunik and Ararat provinces.

Handover was attempted, but was not successful, because some schools still lacked kitchen and storage facilities and the cooks and staff lacked training in sanitation, hygiene and menu development. As a result, SIFI and the Ministry of Education undertook a joint assessment to understand the gaps. Resources were provided to upgrade infrastructure. The Armenian government, WFP and SIFI, formed a new agreement to invest in a transitional model and the Handover Road Map was developed.

The government conducted a Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) exercise with support from WFP, the World Bank and Partnership for Child Development. As a result of gaps identified and consequent recommendations, school meals were included in the government’s Mid-term Expenditure Framework 2016–18 and referenced in the Education Development Programme, 2016–25.

- 2016** Armenia hosted the 18th Global Child Nutrition Forum (GCNF), organised for the first time in South Caucasus. The Armenian government further capitalised on the national momentum around school meals, establishing the Sustainable School Feeding Foundation (now the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency), with dedicated staff and an aim to institutionalise government management of the school meal programme.
- 2017** The Sustainable School Feeding Strategy of 2013 was updated. The government introduced two annexes outlining new elements and approaches for school meals to guide the programme until 2024 with a focus on increasing national involvement and implementation. The Government of Armenia committed to taking over administrative and operational control of one province per year from the WFP portfolio.
- Armenia's Ministry of Health announced its official Order on the Approval of Sanitary Rules and Norms for Educational Institutions that Implement General Education Programmes, informed by the review of critical gaps in 2016.
- The Government of Armenia and the School Feeding and Child Welfare Agency successfully took over the school meals programmes in Tavush province. The simultaneous shift to the cash-based school meals procurement modality in Tavush covered all primary schoolchildren in the province: 7,600 children across 74 schools.
- 2018** New Government, continued collaboration. School meals operations in Shirak were transferred to the Armenian National School Meal Programme.
- 2019** The third province, Aragatsotn, was transitioned to the Government's school meals portfolio. Government aimed to transform school meal programmes into a community-based and owned platform, promoting circular economy, sustainable agriculture and green energy, behaviour change, healthy lifestyles, as well as delivering continued investments in communities – all to support and enhance human capital development.
- In mid-2019, MoESCS and WFP completed and affirmed the Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme 2019–2023.
- 2020** COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic hit globally and all schools closed down in March. Take-home rations replacing on-site school meals were provided to over 102,000 schoolchildren nationwide. A two-month cash transfer (USD 24 per child) was also provided to the guardians of over 26,000 primary schoolchildren from vulnerable families.
- 2021** Schools remained closed most of the time, and alternative take-home rations covering children's food needs for the second semester were provided. WFP extended the operation to cover over 1,500 displaced children from the Nagorno-Karabakh region enrolled in Armenian schools. Support was also provided to 1,300 vulnerable kitchen helpers.
- Schools reopened to children in mid-October 2021. Regional administrations and provinces organised a series of donor conferences, fundraising and networking events, resulting in 94 percent of schools in Gegharkunik and 100 percent of schools in Lori receiving additional private investments to improve their kitchen infrastructure, thus ensuring a smooth transition to the National School Meal Programme.
- 2022** The Government of Armenia approved the National Food Security Strategy with the National School Meal Programme included.
- The Ministry of Education, Sciences, Culture and Sports and WFP signed an updated Road Map to Handover/Takeover of the Sustainable School Feeding Programme.
- 2023** All provinces were handed over to the Armenian Government and the transition was completed. WFP continued to support the Government as a technical partner.
- Armenia submitted its national commitments to the School Meals Coalition and attended the School Meals Coalition Summit in Paris.

All photos: WFP Armenia

World Food Programme

Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131

wfp.org