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# The importance of school meals programmes in fragile and conflict affected settings: framing the prospects for contribution to peace and social cohesion



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**The importance of school meals programmes  
in fragile and conflict affected settings:  
framing the prospects for contribution  
to peace and social cohesion**

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# Executive summary

School meals programmes are an important instrument that can address health and nutrition, education, food security and livelihood outcomes, among others, especially for schoolchildren, families and communities in vulnerable situations. When daily life and routines are maintained, school meals can do so systematically as a component of a national social protection system. But they can also be used to prepare for and respond to covariate shocks to provide affected people with equitable access to basic resources and services and safeguard continued investments in human capital development.

The escalating effects of conflict, climate, economic and other shocks, combined with unprecedented forced displacement and migration, have made clear the need for responses that work across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus to support more effective and resilient systems that can contribute to food security and human capital development, particularly for the most vulnerable. In this context, **it is critical that WFP, as a global leader in school meals, better captures the lessons learned from its programming in fragile and conflict affected settings (FCAS) to bolster the nascent evidence base on school meals in emergencies and their contribution to peace (CtP) and social cohesion, which was identified as WFP's primary CtP.** The importance of school meals in emergencies, including in FCAS, is acknowledged across several WFP Policies and Strategies. However, these documents

often fall short of offering detailed strategic guidance for planning and implementing school meals programmes in such complex contexts (WFP, 2021b). A WFP Technical Note on Peace, Conflict and School Feeding (WFP, 2022b) begins to address this gap by examining the potential contributions of school meals to peace and social cohesion in FCAS.

Building on this foundation, **this paper synthesizes the current evidence available on the topic and aims at informing and supporting WFP's efforts to better understand and adapt school meals in emergencies, especially in FCAS.** Whether in support or on behalf of government's efforts, **the paper explores how school meals can serve not only as a critical safety net in these contexts, but also as a strategic tool to foster CtP and social cohesion.**

Drawing on the Technical Note (WFP, 2022b), **this paper further explores the pathways of change** through which school meals in emergencies (i) could contribute to positive change for the lives and livelihoods of those it is aiming to serve, and (ii) could generate broader benefits for the community. It also **examines how these pathways of change fit into WFP's School Feeding Theory of Change (ToC)** (WFP, 2022c). Furthermore, while **outlining pathways of change for future engagement, the paper proposes recommendations for more conflict-sensitive programming and targeted evidence-generation in FCAS.**

Specifically, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- What does existing **evidence reveal about the role of school meals programmes in contributing to peace and social cohesion** across the different phases of an emergency - before, during and after?
- How can **school meals in emergencies be designed to be both shock-responsive and conflict-sensitive?**
- What are the **pathways** through which school meals in FCAS can **lead to deliberate secondary outcomes related to CtP, including social cohesion?**





# 1. Introduction

**The world is facing an unprecedented food crisis, driven primarily by conflicts and insecurity** (FSIN and GNAFC, 2025), underscoring the growing interconnection between hunger and conflict and the urgent need for responses that work across the HDP nexus. **School meals programmes reach nearly 420 million children worldwide on most school days.** They are probably the most extensive social protection programmes and, with a budget of USD 48 billion, are among the largest of human development interventions (World Bank, 2024). In fact, school meals can increase the resilience of schoolchildren and families facing poverty, food insecurity and social exclusion in regular times, by providing nutrition and support access to education, while increasing the disposable income available to families.

But school meals can also be used in the context of emergencies to provide affected people with equitable access to basic services and safeguard continued investments in human capital development (WFP, 2024b). **It is vital that WFP, as a global leader on school meals, better understands and adapts school meals programmes in FCAS to identify entry points through which such programmes can contribute to secondary social cohesion outcomes, in addition to fulfilling their primary objectives.**

Against this backdrop, in 2023, WFP established a research partnership with IDS to critically assess the nascent yet limited evidence and explore opportunities for deeper insights into how school meals can contribute to peace and social cohesion, particularly in FCAS. As part of this collaboration, IDS and WFP developed this comprehensive framing paper. The paper first presents its **main purpose and key research**

**questions** (Chapter 2), followed by **definitions of key terms and concepts**, among which ‘conflict sensitivity’, ‘contribution to peace’ and ‘social cohesion’ (Chapter 4). It then outlines the **main characteristics of school meals in emergencies**, which vary significantly depending on the type, scale, duration, and impacts of each emergency (Chapter 5.1). Considering the variety of situations and consequent implications, the framing paper discusses the main **trade-offs and programmatic challenges** that need to be considered in these contexts. After this framework, it delves into the potential unintended negative consequences that school meals in FCAS may have on schoolchildren, families, communities, the wider society and the broader context, which may become a source of conflict themselves (Chapter 5.2). Therefore, the paper highlights the importance for school meals programmes in FCAS of having a robust understanding of the context in which they operate, grounded in an in-depth **conflict analysis and a conflict sensitivity risk assessment** and in the identification of **mitigation measures** (Chapter 5.3). While acknowledging that the evidence on school meals in FCAS, CtP and social cohesion is fairly limited in research and tends to be part of secondary or tertiary objectives of existing studies or evaluations, the framing paper observes that a carefully designed, conflict-sensitive school meals intervention can plausibly foster improved social cohesion, which is WFP’s main contributions to peace. In light of this, the framing paper explores potential **pathways of change** through which school meals programmes may contribute to positive changes in the lives of key target groups, **with a specific focus to achieving secondary peace outcomes in the form of social cohesion** (Chapter 5.5).

# 2. Purpose and research questions

WFP is the largest humanitarian organization supporting governments in implementing school meals programmes<sup>1</sup>, by providing global thought leadership, technical assistance and operational support with partners (WFP, 2024b). As the point of reference for school meals globally, regionally and nationally, it is critical that WFP better captures the lessons learned from its programming in FCAS to bolster the nascent evidence base on school meals in emergencies, CtP and social cohesion.

**This paper, which synthesizes the current evidence available on the topic, aims at informing and supporting WFP’s efforts to better understand and adapt school meals in emergencies, especially in FCAS.** Whether in support or on behalf of government’s efforts, **it explores how school meals programmes can serve** not only as a powerful safety net in these contexts, but also **as a strategic tool to foster contributions to peace and social cohesion.**





However, this quest is complicated by i) the paucity of evidence in this area due to the difficulties of conducting high quality research in emergency, and in particular in FCAS<sup>2</sup>; and ii) the limited conceptualisation of how to formulate and implement policy and programming within the space of the triple nexus – that is, within the overlap of humanitarian, development, and peace building initiatives.

**The outcomes of interest for this paper are CtP through the strengthening of social cohesion. These outcomes are most pertinent for situations of conflict, and political and social instability, with some growing situations related to movements of people due to acute and large-scale climate disasters.**

For this reason, this paper focuses mostly on ‘emergencies’ related to situations of conflict or fragility that are predominantly characterised by weak institutional and governance environment, insecurity, violence, conflict, displacement, or post conflict.

The importance of school meals in emergencies, including in FCAS, is acknowledged in both WFP’s School Feeding Strategy 2020-2030 (WFP, 2020a) and School Meals Policy (WFP, 2024b). However, these documents often fall short of offering detailed strategic guidance for planning and implementing school meals programmes in such complex contexts (WFP, 2021b). A WFP Technical Note on Peace, Conflict and School Feeding (WFP, 2022b) begins to address this gap by examining the potential contributions of school meals to peace and social cohesion in FCAS. This paper draws on this Technical Note but expands it by **further exploring the pathways of change**, or chains of results, by which school meals in emergencies (i) can contribute to positive change for the lives and livelihoods of those it is aiming to serve, and (ii) can generate broader benefits for the community.

It also **examines how these pathways of change fit into WFP’s School Feeding ToC (WFP, 2022c)**. Furthermore, while outlining pathways of change for future engagement, **the paper proposes recommendations for more conflict-sensitive programming and targeted evidence-generation in FCAS contexts.**

Specific research questions explored in this paper are:

- What does existing **evidence reveal about the role of school meals programmes in contributing to peace and social cohesion** across the different phases of an emergency - before, during and after?
- How can **school meals in emergencies be designed to be both shock-responsive and conflict-sensitive**?
- What are the **pathways** through which school meals in FCAS can **lead to intentional secondary outcomes related to CtP, including social cohesion**?

## 3. Methodology

This paper draws upon literature and information highlighted and reviewed in previous WFP-commissioned reports. These include: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Case Studies (Mali and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Colombia) and the Preliminary Report (Delgado et al., 2019; Delgado, 2020), a Global Literature Review (WFP, 2020h), an Evaluation of the contribution of school feeding to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WFP, 2021b), the Evaluation Series on emergency school feeding (covering Lebanon, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Niger) (WFP, 2022a), a Technical Review of school feeding programmes in refugee settings (UNHCR & WFP, 2022), and a Technical Briefing Note on Peace, Conflict and School Feeding (WFP, 2022b).

Further searches were carried out focused on the period post-2020, and on literature exploring more broadly contribution to peace and social cohesion and humanitarian aid. Search terms were developed in an iterative process as searches were undertaken, as well as searching references of references. Searches were undertaken using academic databases including ProQuest, ResearchGate, Wiley Online Library, JStor, Taylor & Francis Online, Scopus (Elsevier). Google and Google Scholar were also utilised to capture non-academic/grey publications and to search citations from 2020 of the relevant literature already identified in the Global Literature Review (‘citation pearls’). Rapid searches of key words on the institutional websites of WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR were also undertaken.



## 4. Terminology and concepts

A Glossary of Terms is provided in Appendix 1. However, a few key terms need expounding here in relation to this paper and WFP's position. Specifically, these are: emergencies and HDP nexus; fragility and conflict; school meals in emergencies; contribution to peace and conflict sensitivity; and social cohesion.

### 4.1. Emergencies and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus

This paper uses WFP's 2005 corporate definition of *emergency* when referring to emergency contexts. Namely (WFP, 2005: 4):

"emergencies are defined as urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event or series of events has occurred which causes human suffering or imminently threatens human lives or livelihoods and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event or series of events which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale.

The event or series of events may comprise one or a combination of the following:

1. **sudden calamities** such as earthquakes, floods, locust infestations and similar unforeseen disasters;
2. **human-made emergencies** resulting in an influx of refugees or the internal displacement of populations or in the suffering of otherwise affected populations;

3. food scarcity conditions owing to **slow-onset events** such as drought, crop failures, pests, and diseases that result in an erosion of communities and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs;
4. severe food access or availability conditions resulting from sudden **economic shocks, market failure, or economic collapse** — and that result in an erosion of communities' and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs; and
5. **a complex emergency**<sup>3</sup> for which the Government of the affected country or the Secretary-General of the United Nations has requested the support of WFP."

**'Emergencies' cover a very broad range of covariate shocks and contexts**, some of which will share little commonality for designing and implementing a response. Hence, **the instruments, providers, and avenues for responding to emergencies will vary by the scale, urgency and complexity of the shock**, by the **national (or humanitarian) actors' capacity and politics**, and by the **differing agendas of national (or humanitarian) actors** at any given point.

The *HDP nexus* is a term describing the **interconnections between humanitarian assistance, development cooperation, and peacebuilding efforts**. It represents a shift toward integrated responses that aim to reduce long-term humanitarian needs by addressing the underlying drivers of crises, including political, economic, social, and environmental factors. The SDGs provide a guiding framework to help countries set national development priorities within this approach. A nexus approach is one whose goal is to "[strengthen] collaboration,

coherence and complementarity [in an approach that] seeks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each pillar (...) to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict" (OECD, 2019).

It is recognized that humanitarian response should be understood more holistically, and as part of the nexus (INEE, 2024). In practice, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding activities often happen simultaneously, and they intersect in their efforts to achieve the shared goals of alleviating human suffering, strengthening resilience, and preventing or ending conflict.

The Strategic Evaluation to assess WFP's Contribution of School Feeding Activities to the SDGs (WFP, 2021b) determined that school feeding is increasingly identified as a holistic intervention, which can operate effectively across the nexus. It also determined that in the different Country Strategic Plans (CSP), school feeding is primarily associated with addressing the root causes of hunger, focusing on areas such as policy, government capacity strengthening, and nutrition/healthy diets, while also contributing to resilience, particularly through home-grown school feeding (HGSF). In fewer instances, school feeding has been identified as a crisis response mechanism, with a focus on shock-responsive school feeding<sup>4</sup>.

### 4.2. Fragility and conflict

WFP distinguishes between fragility and conflict using the following definitions. *Fragility* is defined by "the **inability of a state to fulfil its responsibilities and perform the functions necessary to meet citizen's basic needs and expectations**. Authorities in fragile states often suffer from a lack of legitimacy, authority, and capacities to provide basic services and protect citizens" (WFP, 2020f: 4). Consequences of this

may be conflict, violence, and difficulties in achieving or sustaining peace<sup>5</sup>.

*Conflict* is defined as "**a system of competitive interactions between two or more parties** (individuals, groups, states, etc.) **who pursue mutually incompatible goals or compete for the same goal**. Conflicts can be pursued **violently** (war, terrorist attacks etc.), or **non-violently** (litigation). Conflict is entrenched in human relations and is a natural phenomenon in the process of societal change" (WFP, 2020f: 2-3).

It should be noted that the manner and degree to which countries are classified as fragile or in conflict is subject to different interpretations and approaches, whereby some of the main methodologies include:

- The [World Bank Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#), which in 2025 categorises countries into those affected by violent conflict (21 contexts) and those with high levels of institutional and social fragility (18 contexts).
- The [OECD States of Fragility](#), which in its 2025 report identifies 61 contexts with high and extreme fragility, 24 experiencing armed conflict and 8 in a state of war.
- The [Fragile States Index by the Fund for Peace](#), which in 2024 classifies the most at risk states as Very High Alert (1), High Alert (9), Alert (19), and High Warning (23).

Individual international agencies may furthermore have their own approaches to assessing fragility and vulnerability in line with their mandates. Regardless of the methodology used, the final list of most fragile or conflict affected countries tends to be quite similar. It is critical, however, to recognise that the nature of that fragility and conflict differs enormously, with major implications for the way in which these impacts entry points for meaningful and principled engagement (WFP, 2025).



## 4.3. School meals in emergencies

The term *school meals in emergencies* encompasses a **variety of approaches that use school meals to prepare for and respond to covariate shocks**. Depending on the context and on the objectives of the emergency response, these approaches will include channeling humanitarian assistance with the main objective of guaranteeing **business continuity of school meals programmes** for children and/or their families (where already established), **while adapting to meet new schoolchildren's needs**:

- **directly through national systems** (or part of), which include:
  - social protection systems, and/or
  - disaster risk management systems
- **in parallel to national systems**



The use of social protection for addressing covariate shocks is also known as shock-responsive social protection (SRSP)<sup>6</sup> and it focuses on systems of sustained delivery and scaled up support in the event of large-scale shocks, which are natural, economic or political shocks affecting large numbers of people and/or communities at once (OPM, 2015: 1).

The SRSP agenda is most effective when built on well-functioning social protection and disaster risk management systems, whether managed by the state or international organizations. In countries with strong systems, shocks like droughts or food price increases can be mitigated, ensuring continued support for affected populations, including through school meals. However, effective coordination among key government and international actors is essential to maintaining system continuity during crises and extending assistance to those not covered by national programmes.

The same idea is now being increasingly linked to school meals programmes, which, despite not being frequently explicitly stated in national policy frameworks as being part of the national social protection system, constitute the largest social protection programme in many countries worldwide and often the only form of social assistance targeting school-age children (World Bank, 2024). In fact, **there is growing interest among school meals practitioners on how to make school meals more shock responsive, that is to say able to both withstand a large-scale shock and adapt to meet the new needs of schoolchildren and their families before, during and after such shock**. This is also reflected in the recently updated School Meals Policy, which commits to strengthening the shock responsiveness of school meals programmes. As part of its innovative partnership approach, WFP aims to collaborate with partners to establish a new technical assistance platform aimed at supporting governments in using school meals programmes to anticipate and adapt to covariate shocks, while ensuring timely and effective responses during and in the aftermath of such shocks (WFP, 2024b).

As detailed in the definition above, emergencies threaten human lives and livelihoods on a scale that a government concerned may not have the means to remedy. If an effective parallel system of support exists that is outside of the government, such as the one provided by humanitarian actors, then it can link with national systems from a preparedness perspective and facilitate an early response to mitigate and address new vulnerabilities and an additional caseload of need. This can be the case, for instance, for climate, economic or health emergencies.

However, **in the context of fragility, conflict and widespread violence, as well as with exceptional climatic events, emergency response, including through school meals, typically sits outside national systems and will**

**function independently simply because the systems are destroyed or unable to function**. For instance, where war is ongoing, institutions and infrastructure may have collapsed, revenue collection is decimated and available funds not prioritised for social investments, governments are potentially parties to conflicts and may not have effective control over their territory with the other non-state armed groups present. Conflicting parties, moreover, may not even be interested in pursuing a peaceful settlement and may be content with maintaining the *status quo*. **As a result, systems of social protection, including school meals programmes, may be functioning only partially or not at all**, and serving only a portion of the affected population, due to damage, insecurity, lack of impartiality, capacity and/or lack of trust. **Nonetheless, even in weak national systems there may be opportunities to channel emergency responses directly through government systems, or parts of it**, and to include lessons learnt to inform in the future a more shock-responsive social protection system.

Beyond the impact that conflict has on weakening social protection systems and programmes, such as school meals, there are important humanitarian considerations and implications that shape how WFP and other international actors can engage in conflict-affected settings. This is on the one hand because the social protection system, and how it previously defined vulnerability and eligibility, may be upholding or deepening social, political, or geographic inequalities that are now fueling the conflict. On the other hand, the government, which typically convenes social protection systems, may be a party to the conflict. This raises **serious risks to humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, requiring international actors to carefully navigate their engagement**. While engagement may still be possible, it must be **grounded in robust and up-to-date context and conflict sensitivity analysis and aligned with humanitarian principles**.

A final consideration when trying to understand and frame the pathways by which school meals may contribute to peace and social cohesion is the variety of FCAS contexts which exist. Each setting has its own specific history and dynamics of conflict, fragility and displacement. In the context of conflict, the interplay between state and non-state social protection interventions will vary across states of crisis. For instance, in a politically stable crisis where state legitimacy is broadly accepted there will be scope for state-provided social protection, yet capacity may be undermined so there is room for alternate providers to support. Whereas in a situation of acute violence and contested state legitimacy the functioning of formal structures can be severely compromised, and humanitarian aid may also be restricted. Other settings – post-conflict and refugee settings – define the scope for who is willing and able to provide social protection and on what terms.

### 4.4. Conflict sensitivity and contributions to peace

Peace is complex and multifaceted, culturally shaped and contested, and is not easily quantifiable (Delgado et al., 2019; WFP, 2020h). Yet, despite this complexity, **food assistance has the potential to lay the foundations for peace, by addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, and fostering inclusion, trust, and social cohesion** (WFP, 2013b). This vision aligns with the United Nations’ concept of “sustaining peace”, which calls for a comprehensive approach aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing its root causes and reinforcing national capacities for resilience (UN General Assembly, 2020). In line with this global agenda, WFP’s 2013 Peacebuilding Policy marked a first step in clarifying the organisation’s role in contributions to peace through food assistance. and identified three main directions:

1. enhancing its ability to conduct conflict and risk analysis;
2. pursuing conflict-sensitive programming with options that can be selected to fit the context;
3. exploring new opportunities to work with partners on peacebuilding to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to WFP’s work (WFP, 2013b)

While the WFP 2022-2025 Strategic Plan further iterated that as a key driver of hunger, conflict provides entry points for WFP’s programming, new partnerships, and the generation of evidence, the 2023 Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Strategy (WFP, 2023d) clarified the organisation’s ambitions on contributions to peace. Though over a decade old, an evaluation of the Peacebuilding Policy (WFP, 2023a: 13) concluded that “overall, the policy can be considered well-formulated with realistic and practical principles that can guide the organisation in its approach to conflict sensitivity and contribution to peace.” This normative framework is complemented by WFP’s Contributions to Peace paper (WFP, 2025), which outlines WFP’s evolving efforts to contribute to peace by focusing on social cohesion, which is WFP’s main CtP.

Based on the key UN frameworks and on WFP’s internal policies and strategies, *contributions to peace* in WFP refer to **deliberate efforts to help address the drivers of conflict and to support peace where possible, especially at the local level** (WFP, 2020f: 3), **without losing WFP’s main focus on addressing hunger and malnutrition**.

For WFP (2023d: 4), *conflict sensitivity* requires attempts to:

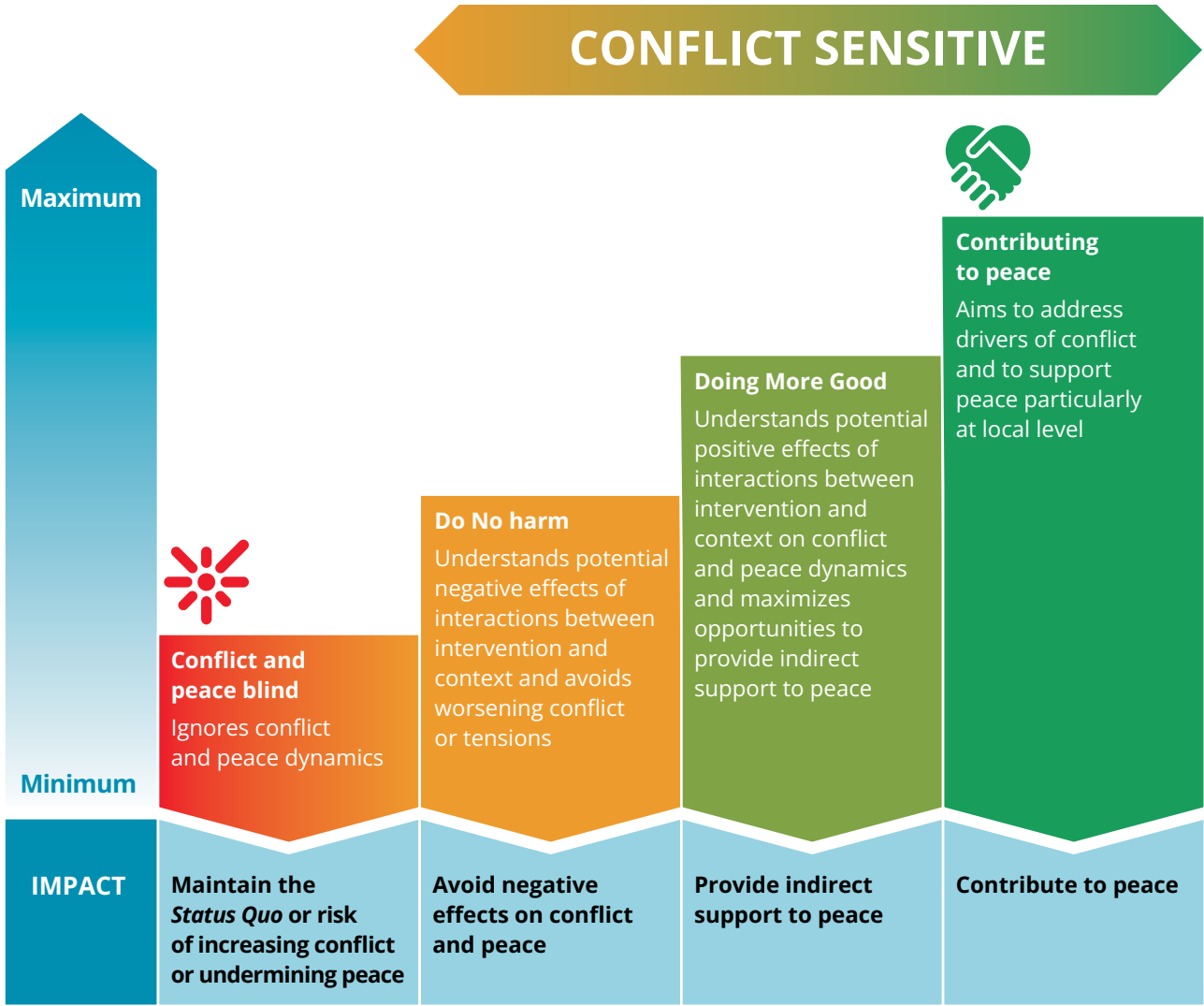
1. understand the context it operates in;
2. understand the interactions between its interventions and that context;
3. use this knowledge to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict.

*Conflict sensitivity* can be presented as a continuum (Figure 1 below). At the far left-hand side of the diagram, a **conflict blind** approach ignores the conflict and peace dynamics and will leave the situation unchanged or may even make it worse. A **conflict-sensitive** approach, on the other hand, will demonstrate an awareness of how the intervention interacts with the context in which it is being implemented. At minimum, it will aim to avoid having any negative effect, and whenever possible having a positive effect and maximizing opportunities to provide indirect support to peace. More ambitiously, at the far right, it may **contribute to peace**, by deliberately

seeking to influence conflict drivers in a positive direction, possibly even in ways that directly transform them.

It is important to note that *conflict sensitivity* helps to manage the challenges of **working in conflict**, ensuring that the organisation avoids any unintended negative effects, manages reputational and other operational risks, and enhances programme quality. Conflict sensitivity goes beyond *Do No Harm* and aims at having a positive effect and maximizing opportunities to provide indirect support to peace.

Figure 1: The conflict sensitivity continuum



Source: adapted from Birch, Carter, Lind and Sabates-Wheeler 2023, and from WFP, 2025



*Contribution to peace*, meanwhile, entails **working on conflict**, with interventions aimed at addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, contributing to preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation, and recurrence of conflict and promoting peace. **Programming supporting contributions to peace should be based upon a comprehensive conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity risk assessment, explicitly state secondary CtP, including social cohesion, outcomes, integrate relevant dimensions into M&E frameworks, leverage enablers such as gender mainstreaming and community engagement, and explore partnership opportunities, while employing a conflict sensitive approach** (WFP, 2025).

Education policies and programs that integrate attention to conflict together with technical solutions can mitigate the risk of investments in education increasing tensions and will be better aligned with the principle of *Do No Harm* (INEE, 2024). **Conflict sensitivity and deliberate attempts to strengthen social cohesion provide a foundation on which humanitarian and development actors can contribute to building peace through education interventions, such as school meals.** As such, these interventions contribute to the operationalization of the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus.

### 4.5. Social cohesion

There is no single agreed definition of *social cohesion* within academia or public policy (Tawil & Harvey, 2004; Moustakas, 2023). Despite ongoing conceptual debates, WFP sees it as referring to “the levels of trust, respect, tolerance, solidarity, and equal opportunities in any society, and for the dignity and wellbeing of every person and the common good of all. This affects the political, social and economic spheres equally” (WFP, 2020f: 7). Hence, **WFP’s programming efforts should support the cultivation of trust, respect, solidarity, and equal opportunity to strengthen social cohesion, which is WFP’s primary contribution to peace** (WFP, 2025).

**WFP can support building social cohesion by addressing intra- and inter-group tensions (horizontal social cohesion) and by expanding access to basic services and social protection schemes with the objective to increase inclusion and trust in state institutions (vertical social cohesion).** Enhancing capacities to anticipate, manage, mitigate, resolve, and transform tensions and conflict, ensuring social accountability and effective complaint and feedback mechanisms, and engaging in inclusive social change processes that reduce inequality are important approaches to increase positive impact on peace and conflict dynamics (WFP, 2025). It is important for research to move past surface-level engagement with the term and pursue in-depth work around how individuals and communities relate to social cohesion and its different sub-dimensions (Moustakas, 2023), as shown in Figure 2 below. How to measure social cohesion (and over which period) and capture complex societal changes is an ongoing challenge, especially around attribution versus contribution (Kantzara, 2011).

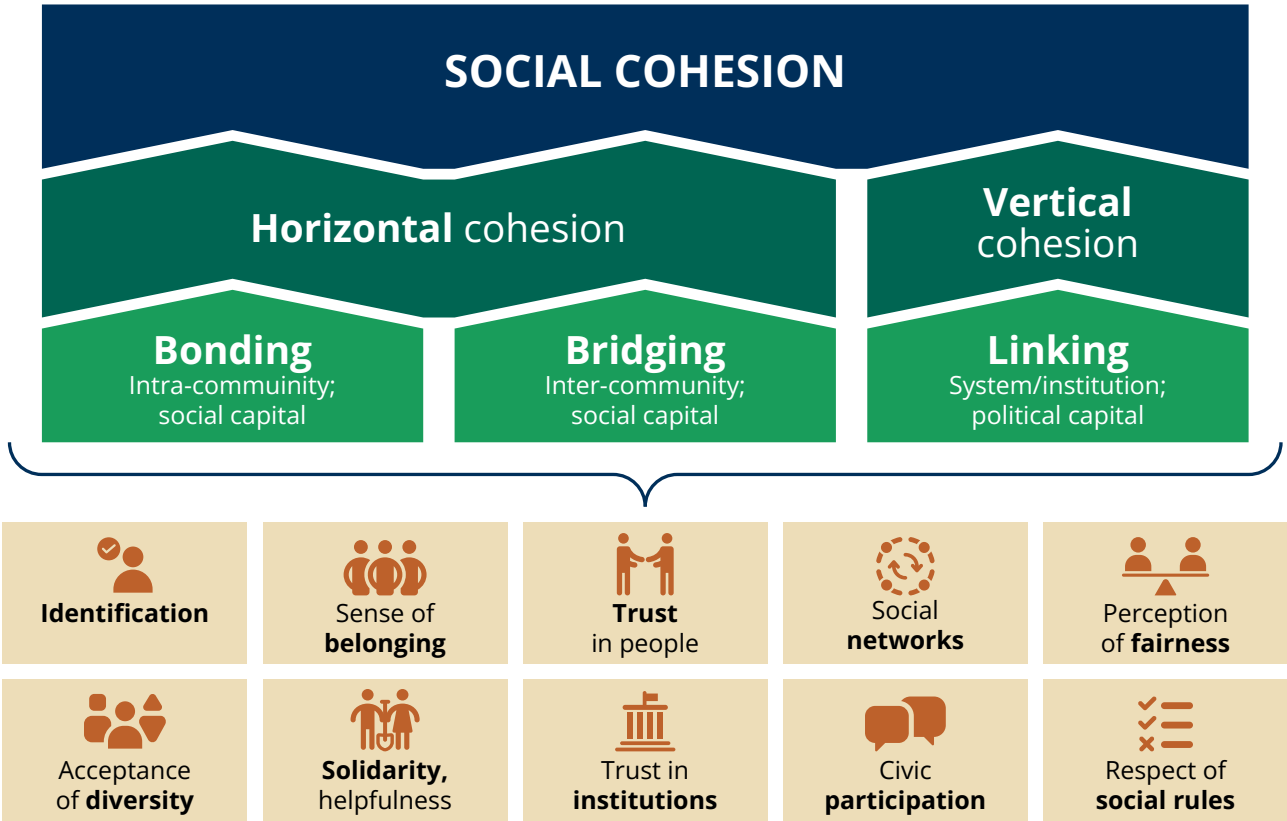
There is also a tendency to view social cohesion always as something positive without questioning unintended consequences of promoting cohesion, such as further marginalisation and exclusion for some groups. This highlights a crucial topic in emergency settings: accountability to affected people (AAP) (i.e. community participation, inclusion and exclusion from school, etc.). WFP has an active commitment to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by the people it assists and people impacted by its interventions.

WFP’s commitment to AAP is founded on two main principles (WFP, 2023c: 5):

1. Affected people have a right to be actively involved and have their needs and preferences reflected in the decisions that affect their lives;
2. Meaningful engagement that results in informed and empowered populations makes food security and nutrition interventions more effective.

**Hence, if WFP contributes to strengthening a government-led school meals programme that is not accountable to affected people** (for example, if girls, children with disabilities and minority groups are excluded from accessing school and other services), **then it will be hard to contribute to social cohesion and peace.**

Figure 2. Outcomes of investing in and building different types of social cohesion



Source: (WFP, 2025)

## 5. Review of school meals in emergencies, conflict sensitivity, and contributions to peace and social cohesion

**There is very limited documented evidence on if/how school meals contribute to peace and social cohesion, findings are tentative in nature and more research must be undertaken** (WFP, 2022b; 2020h).<sup>7</sup> Most of the available evidence on school meals in emergencies focuses on access to education and retention of children, or, to a lesser degree, on the nutritional and food security impacts (WFP, 2020h; 2023b). The evidence on school meals in emergencies and complementary objectives of contribution to peace and social cohesion are fairly limited in research and tend to be part of secondary or tertiary objectives of existing studies or evaluations (WFP, 2023b). Whilst there are emerging approaches to developing and applying indicators to measure social cohesion in the context of a programme such as school meals, the variables that determine peace are complex, interrelated and only partially impacted by an intervention such as school meals. Measuring contributions to peace without accounting for these other variables, as such, is difficult and using gold standard impact evaluation frameworks, such as mixed methods research with control trials, may be impractical or even impossible in FCAS settings due to ethical, logistical, and contextual constraints.

**Despite such limitations it is plausible that there is a correlation between a carefully designed and conflict-sensitive school meals intervention and improved social cohesion through several pathways, which will be discussed below** (see paragraph 5.5).

The need for clear conceptual and operational guidance for school meals in emergencies was highlighted in the Synthesis of Evaluations report (WFP, 2022a). This includes specific guidance on the operational implications for resourcing school meals in emergencies, programme design (integrated, accountable programming, that takes into consideration the specific needs of women, men, girls and boys, in partnership), targeting, and monitoring (development of clear results indicators for direct and indirect benefits of the specific school meals in emergencies activities and the different target groups; along with suitable data collection, tools procedures and earmarking of financial resources) (WFP, 2022a: 14). Later sections in this paper present some key considerations for conflict sensitive school meals in emergencies programming design and operationalisation.

### 5.1. Characteristics of school meals programmes in emergencies

To better understand what happens to school meals programmes in emergencies it is necessary to locate the discussion within the education in emergencies field. **Education in emergencies (EiE) refers to the provision of equitable, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities for people of all ages in situations of crisis, from preparedness to response, and through to recovery.** It includes a variety of education modalities, from in-person teaching to distance learning and can be provided through early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocational, higher, and adult education. It also can occur in a variety of contexts (e.g., offline, online, or hybrid). **In an emergency and through to recovery, quality education provides physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection that can save and sustain lives** (INEE, 2024).

Education is especially critical for the hundreds of millions of learners affected by crises, but it is often seriously disrupted, leaving them unable to enjoy the transformative effects of inclusive and equitable quality education. EiE promotes dignity and sustains life by offering these children, young people, and adults a safe learning environment. **Schools and other learning environments can be an entry point for identifying and supporting learners who need essential services beyond the education sector, such as protection, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and health** (INEE, 2024). School meals are part of the EiE ecosystem through the INEE's Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024), a comprehensive package of interventions which aims at improving the quality of education preparedness, response, and recovery and at increasing access to safe and relevant learning opportunities in such contexts.

Before, during and after emergencies, a range of factors can affect the dynamics and delivery of school meals programmes. **Interventions need to sufficiently recognize the specific characteristics of these complex operating environments and types of emergencies** (man-made vs. natural; slow-onset vs. sudden-onset; recurrent vs occasional; etc.). Some emergencies may require a complete reconfiguration of school meals operations, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The variety of situations prevailing in FCAS, of relevance for this framing paper, require a few trade-offs and programmatic decisions to be carefully considered, which are discussed later (see paragraph 5.2).

#### 5.1.1. Structural/system impact of emergencies

Emergency situations may increase barriers to education (INEE, 2024). **Education disruptions, which include infrastructure damage (buildings, classrooms, water and sanitation), school closures, security concerns (so children are not being sent to school or schools are occupied by armed groups), and displacement (children and their families moving away from the emergency or schools are used as collective shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs))** (UNICEF, 2019), among others, **need to be factored into any assessment and decision making around priorities, including for school meals programmes.** This was clearly highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternative education modalities can be used to address both short and longer-term disruptions of in-person learning (INEE, 2024), but this influences the provision of school meals as well.

**Damaged or lack of infrastructure, including cooking facilities and limited access to water, may mean that food choices are restricted to snacks, pre-packaged food, or take-home rations instead of fresh and local hot-cooked meals.** This might mean tradeoffs in terms of the quality and quantity of the meal, the value of the income transfer when applicable, and



the nutritional benefits of it, versus what is economically and logistically feasible in each context.

**Compromised food production capacities and lack of functioning markets will likely make it difficult to source food locally in a sustainable manner.** For instance, deciding to adopt or maintain a HGSF model in emergencies requires a careful assessment, based on several factors including feasibility of approach, choice of modalities, value chain analysis, targeting, investment requirements and on the potential disruption of food provision.

**In the case where emergencies cause displacement and school closures, school meals can be significantly hindered and/or becomes an ineffective modality for delivering food assistance** (Aurino et al., 2019). For example, in Syria, at times security concerns interrupted food dispatches to schools, particularly when they were near to conflict

areas (WFP, 2020e: 17). **Mobility of families and children from unsecure to more secure areas might hamper project effectiveness by dramatically and unexpectedly increasing or decreasing the number of children receiving school meals**, which requires organizational readiness to adopt flexible logistics and programmatic approaches.

### 5.1.2. Programmatic considerations and implications

**Considerable programmatic challenges during emergencies include**, but are not limited to, **access to the areas affected** (such as restricted physical access to conflict zones due to security concerns), **financial constraints**, and **logistical issues** (such as procurement of food) **in delivering school meals** (WFP, 2021b; 2022a). There can be differences within countries and regions experiencing emergencies in terms of impacts on school feeding delivery, design, and effectiveness (Tranchant et al., 2019).



School meals in emergencies have an intrinsic objective of supporting the continuity of education, i.e., bringing children to school and ensuring they stay there (WFP, 2020d: 32). For instance, it was found that proximity to the conflict in Mali affected school feeding results relating to enrolment and completion, with enrolment increasing most in the worst conflict-affected areas, and attainment improving more in communities further away (Aurino et al., 2019). **But while meals delivered in schools can offer children a safe environment**, which can reduce the risk of child labour, recruitment into armed forces, and forced marriage, **these protection benefits need to be carefully analysed and weighed against other risks and challenges inherent to emergency settings**. For instance, when children must travel long distances to reach schools, they face heightened risks of insecurity and violence during their journey, which may discourage parents from sending their children to school (WFP, 2023e: 16).

**Considering protection aspects in school meals programmes in humanitarian contexts is essential to ensure no child is excluded from education, due to the risks faced outside of school.** In Niger, protection concerns arose from the financial and in-kind contributions required for school meals, which placed a significant burden on already vulnerable families. Many parents were unable to meet these expectations, and some reported that their children faced the threat of exclusion from school as a result (WFP, 2020d: 32). **A focus on the risks associated with staying in school and the necessary mitigation measures must also be factored into the decisions around school meals support.** In Niger, protection and conflict sensitivity concerns were key in the decisions to move schools to more secure locations at the start of the crisis in 2015, as schools were being deliberately targeted by armed groups as symbols of the Government, and because food stores were present, making them attractive targets (WFP, 2020d: 14). See paragraph 5.2.2 for further considerations on protection concerns.

**To encourage girls' enrolment and attendance, school meals programmes may include additional support for girls**, in the form of take-home rations or cash grants. These incentives can influence a shift in social norms that enable greater educational opportunities for girls. **However**, in contexts of extreme vulnerability, **this may lead to unintended consequences, which in turn can result in tensions within families or communities**, potentially undermining the program's broader objectives (WFP, 2023e). With this in mind, programming should involve the broader community through consultations, advocacy and outreach efforts to explore and dismantle the social norms that influence educational outcomes for boys and girls, thereby building trust in the proposed programme actions.

**Furthermore, food delivery may require adaptations.** In Niger, WFP and partners adjusted food delivery to schools to every two weeks instead of three months to mitigate security risks around storing large quantities of food, as looting of food warehouses can happen in such circumstances (WFP, 2020d: 32). In the most conflict-affected areas of Mali, high market prices and low food availability in local markets caused WFP to switch modalities from cash provision to in-kind distribution to schools (WFP, 2022b: 4).

Lastly, strong community participation and ownership are often seen as a key lever for the organisation and delivery of school meals programmes. However, **in the organization and delivery of school meals in emergency settings, assumptions around community participation and contribution may be challenged because of the level of vulnerability of populations and the difficult operating environment**. Hence, assumptions around community participation need to be questioned and factored into school meals in emergencies design and implementation (WFP, 2020d: 32).

### 5.1.3. Adaptability, preparedness, and resilience

The modalities of school meals programmes can also change in emergency situations. This underscores the need for flexible delivery methods and programme designs that can adapt to shifting conditions and ensure the continuity of education and protection for children during conflict or disasters (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022).

**Flexibility and preparedness are key factors that strengthen programmes in a time of emergency:** these are especially important when different covariate shocks occur simultaneously or in quick succession (Ferrero et al., 2023). Examples of adaptability include changing food delivery modalities and focusing on the safety and educational continuity of children in crisis situations.

Resilience aims at mitigating the negative effects of crises on education by strengthening the capacities of individuals, communities, and education systems to cope with the impacts of hazards and shocks, respond effectively to meet local needs, and bounce back stronger (INEE, 2024). Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and resilience play an important role in keeping schools and other learning environments safe during crises. DRR and resilience initiatives can provide schools with strategies to limit disruptions to learning, ensure learning continuity, and protect learners, teachers and other education personnel, and infrastructure from the impacts of hazards and risks. **Bringing and applying the DRR and resilience lens to education systems and to school meals interventions can promote improved and sustained approaches in procuring for and delivering school meals.**

However, these considerations depend on the type of events and the emergency that follows and the broader context – working in an active conflict where the government might be party to

the conflict is very different than providing school meals in refugee camps or in a post-conflict reconstruction context. Furthermore, how programming is adapted to emergencies depends on the level of ownership of governments of the school meals programme, which will also impact the way WFP operates in that country. As was shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, programmes can pivot from on-site school meals to take home rations, or delivery of food to homes with school children during an emergency. But few examples have been documented of this pivoting happening in response to a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

## 5.2. Consequences of fragility and conflict for school meals programmes

Programme design and implementation are profoundly shaped by the social-political and economic context of any given country, resulting in different operational risks and opportunities (Guinn, 2019). This is exacerbated when working in FCAS, as any initiative conducted in a conflict-affected environment will interact with that conflict and this will have consequences that may have positive or negative effects on the communities and the context.

Although some communities report **unintended consequences** from school meals in non-emergency settings, such as movements of pupils from schools without school meals to schools that provide school meals, **in FCAS these may be heightened as communities are already under considerable duress and coping mechanisms are weaker** (WFP, 2020d: 29). These unintended and often counterproductive consequences **can also become a source of conflict themselves**, running counter to contributions to peace (Novelli et al., 2014).

WFP does not work within a vacuum: when food assistance is delivered in FCAS, it unavoidably impacts political, social, economic, and military dynamics, having both positive and negative effects, with direct or more nuanced and indirect links (WFP, 2023d). These effects include but are not limited to the following: targeting, politicisation of assistance, weaponisation of aid and war economies, all having various implications for WFP. (WFP, 2023d: 6).

**Practitioners need to make sure they build on a robust understanding of the context and conflict, run conflict sensitivity assessments, and identify conflict sensitivity risks and mitigation measures. Otherwise, WFP's school meals programmes in emergencies might have unintended negative consequences on individuals, families, and communities, on wider society and on the broader context/ conflict.** Putting in place mitigation measures is critical to make sure WFP effectively manage those risks and contribute to peace in the long run. Drawing from the Peace, Conflict and School Feeding Technical Briefing Note (WFP, 2022b), highlighted below are some key risks and negative consequences from school meals programmes in FCAS that should generally be considered.

### 5.2.1. Government restrictions on programming (including on humanitarian access)

If regions are controlled by non-state armed groups, government access restrictions may force WFP to support only (government) public schools, potentially being perceived as supporting one side of the conflict and abandoning impartiality and neutrality. This could endanger pupils, teachers, and WFP personnel, including where education of girls is opposed. Government priorities can also restrict WFP's access to non-government-controlled areas and challenge needs-based targeting, undermining the humanitarian principle of impartiality and potentially reinforcing existing inequalities and marginalisation of groups opposing the government.

### 5.2.2. Engagement with schools

While WFP generally supports school meal programmes in public schools that are established by the state, deciding whether to engage with other schools that are still part of the formal education system (ex. community-based education or religious schools), with schools that operate without government oversight, in areas controlled by non-stated armed groups, or with out-of-school children requires careful considerations and management of trade-offs among the humanitarian principles.

Decisions on whether to support schools not promoting a holistic education curriculum or even adopting practices against child rights, like child begging, involve complex ethical considerations and should be discussed with relevant educational stakeholders. Deciding on whether to engage in these schools involves difficult decisions that need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, informed by both principles and practical perspectives, as well as robust conflict analyses (WFP, 2022b: 16).

On the one hand WFP does not want to be perceived as supporting such practice, on the other hand, many children attending these schools likely live in difficult conditions, deprived of adequate medical care and food. In some regions, engagement with these schools can be contentious or impossible due to government restrictions or refusal from religious leaders<sup>8</sup>.



### 5.2.3. Protection concerns for children and their families

- a. **Unintended pull-factors when re-opening of schools in unstable areas:** Creating a sense of normality through the restoration of basic services, including the reopening schools and provision of school meals in conflict-affected zones, can lead to the premature return of IDPs and refugees, exposing them to risks, including protection risks for children.
- b. **Children changing schools for access to school meals:** Students changing schools to access food can increase protection risks and tensions among communities competing for services. It can also have negative consequences for the schools that they leave if children not able to move become ostracised, or lower attendance affects the ability of those schools to mobilise resources to function.
- c. **Schools perceived as legitimate targets by parties warring with the state:** Government services delivery points may become targets for attacks by parties wishing to undermine the legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness of the state in conflict areas, thus exposing both students and school staff to security concerns.
- d. **Exposure to child protection risks:** The protection potential of education is enormous, as schools can be safe places where children can be protected from child labor, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse, and recruitment into armed forces. However, attracting children to school with the incentive of food could inadvertently expose them to insecurity risks when walking long distances to school, or to the risk of forced recruitment by non-state armed groups attacking schools. Not only, gender-based violence (GBV) in schools is, unfortunately, a relatively common phenomenon, whether perpetrated by students, teachers or parents, which is likely to increase in emergency settings. Lack of infrastructure, trained teachers and impunity can place girls and boys at risk of GBV (JPGE, 2019).

### 5.2.4. Self-exclusion of communities from formal education

Previous experience, misinformation and distrust can influence the willingness of some individuals and representative groups to support the participation of their children in formal education. Further, social norms and structural barriers that perpetuate the discrimination and marginalization of these and other ethnic and religious groups, limit the ability of their children to access schooling, including the school meals programmes, that is intended to reach those most vulnerable to food insecurity.

### 5.2.5. Unresponsive local authorities

Local authorities' lack of engagement with the School Management Committees (SMCs) and overall support to school meals can negatively impact people's attitudes towards the state, undermining trust in institutions and having the opposite effect of other positive experiences aimed at building a stronger social contract.

### 5.2.6. Under-resourced schools

If schools are open but do not function effectively, investing in school meals (often in those schools that are in more vulnerable areas anyway) can highlight the discrepancies and inequities. Insufficient resources for attending school (books, uniforms, etc.) can lead to questions about fair resource distribution, undermining confidence in the programme and feeding into wider concerns for discrimination and discontent.

### 5.2.7. Tensions within School Management Committees (SMCs) and lack of adequate dispute resolution mechanisms

Integrating displaced children into schools can lead to resource management tensions with host communities, affecting programme effectiveness. If there are already long-established rivalries

or tensions between groups, not foreseeing dedicated technical and financial support to manage and resolve disputes or address negative social norms, perceptions and behaviours could set the stage for old grievances and perceptions to drive SMCs and deepen conflict<sup>9</sup>.

### 5.2.8. Minimum criteria for selection of schools and procurement partners

The exclusion of schools unable to meet minimum criteria for participation in school meals programmes (e.g. adequate storage, access to drinking water, washing facilities, sewage, etc.) can reinforce feelings of deprivation and alienation among marginalised groups. There may also be concerns on the procurement side when vendors able to fulfil quality standards may already be from an advantaged group, or new business opportunities may be captured by elites

### 5.2.9. Tensions arising from targeting

If school meals in emergencies have the potential to promote social cohesion between communities

they can also bring tensions that work against social cohesion (WFP, 2020d). When vulnerability aligns with identity, targeting the most food insecure can inadvertently coincide with and reinforce existing divisions, undermining stability, increasing tensions and jeopardising perceptions of WFP's neutrality and impartiality.

For instance, differences in provision of education services, including school meals, for host vs refugee or IDP communities can contribute to tensions between these communities<sup>10</sup>. It may even be that differences between groups who receive or do not receive aid have a stronger impact on peacebuilding than the impact of programmes on recipient groups themselves (WFP, 2020h). This highlights issues also around earmarking of funds for specific groups of beneficiaries, which makes adjusting targeting difficult for WFP (WFP, 2023a: 43). However, customary procedure involves scaling-up some support to host communities in parallel to displaced persons to help mitigate unintended negative consequences, although there remain sensitivities around hosting refugees and IDPs. See Box 1 on targeting considerations<sup>11</sup>.





## BOX 1: CONSIDERATIONS FOR TARGETING AND PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Delgado et al. (2019:18) highlights how **the targeting process, which determines who does and does not receive resources, is the most common conflict sensitivity flashpoint across all international assistance and an entry point for contributions to peace. If targeting follows the conflict lines, it can exacerbate division and contribute to conflict.** Humanitarian needs in conflict contexts often surpass available resources and capacities (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). Hence, an important question is how humanitarian actors working in such contexts decide whom to prioritise and where to work with limited resources. According to the humanitarian principles (namely humanity and impartiality), resources should go where the need is greatest. Hence, “prioritisation is a continuous and political process, rather than a one-off exercise to find the best match between needs and programme objectives” (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022: 1).

Important trade-offs in humanitarian operations and targeting in conflict settings sometimes have to be made due to limited resources – with practical considerations such as security and ease of geographic access taking precedence over need in the choice of target areas at times. This was demonstrated in Mali, with programme scale and effectiveness on the one hand, and the practicalities of operating in territory controlled by armed groups on the other (including security, governance and transparency issues) (Tranchant et al., 2019).

There is a critical need for well thought-out and clear programme objectives. For example, in the evaluation of school feeding in emergency (SFIE) in Lebanon it was flagged that programme “expectations around social cohesion should clarify whether the objective is to support social cohesion between students from different nationalities or to support social cohesion and equality between peers” (WFP, 2020c: 36).

Pivoting the modality in school feeding due to security issues is also an important consideration in programming. For example, in the DRC “WFP faced a trade-off between capitalising on the benefits of [HGSF] under conditions of relative security and targeting more vulnerable but unstable geographic areas with more traditional means” (WFP, 2022b: 12). A point raised in the Synthesis of Evaluations is that insufficient conceptual clarity in the design of SFIE interventions in the four case study countries impeded targeting and monitoring and evaluation of these. Broad target group definitions made it difficult to develop detailed programme theories to anticipate how SFIE would be able to respond to particular needs of specific groups in the target population. This limited opportunities to monitor and evaluate the effect of SFIE on these groups (WFP, 2022a: 12). Clear guidance for WFP staff on how to examine and resolve such trade-offs in targeting is needed, especially when addressing multi-faceted needs (WFP, 2022a); WFP is in the process of developing this.

## 5.3. Conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity for school meals in emergencies

Given these possible negative consequences, **it is important to root the design and implementation of school meals programmes in FCAS and results chains in a robust understanding of the context through conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity risk assessment.** Conflict sensitivity is hence key to understand the actions to take to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts (Stabilisation Unit, 2016: 2, 3). It is critical to ensure that emergency responses and interventions in fragile, conflict and post-conflict situations avoid creating or further exacerbating tensions by worsening inequalities, deepening existing divides and mistrust, or undermining and weakening the unifying ties among conflicting communities (Nanthikesan & Uitto, 2012; see Box 1 above). Engaging with all stakeholders, including communities, local authorities, and other agencies, to identify and monitor risks is key, and very importantly to mitigate negative consequences through effective mitigation measures. It also means that school meals programmes in emergencies need to have sufficient resources for mitigation of these risks.

In line with WFP’s Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Strategy (WFP, 2023d) and WFP’s Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment Guidance Note (WFP, 2021a), WFP Country Offices (CO) should conduct conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity risks assessment, document conflict sensitivity risks and integrate them in the CO’s risk register or a school meals in emergencies specific risks matrix, and develop appropriate mitigation measures for the identified risks.

WFP’s Technical Briefing Note on Peace, Conflict and School Feeding (WFP, 2022b) identifies a set of questions specific to school meals programmes (see Table 1 in Appendix 2), which help to identify possible conflict sensitivity concerns or opportunities to support peace for any specific school meals intervention – either in design or under implementation. It builds on, and supplements, WFP’s Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment Guidance Note (WFP, 2021a). Further guidance on the approach to situation analyses for school meals in emergency and fragile settings should also include a people-centred analysis that takes into account the different needs and priorities of girls and boys in accessing education and school meals in emergency contexts (WFP, 2022a: 14).

## 5.4. Complementarity with social protection and disaster-risk management systems

Although there is weak evidence that school meals in emergencies on its own supports contribution to peace, by improving social cohesion, “it is possible that equitable distribution of school feeding in conflict settings, combined with appropriate education responses, could contribute to [peace] and social cohesion” (WFP, 2020h: 24). But how this would actually occur needs further research and evidence, especially as the **impact of school meals in emergencies on CtP and social cohesion is context-dependent and cannot be assumed to emerge automatically** due to, for example, school meals programming facilitating increased interactions between different groups in the community (WFP, 2020h; see Box 2 on school meals and social cohesion among Lebanese and Syrian refugee children in Lebanon).



## BOX 2: SCHOOL MEALS AND SOCIAL COHESION BETWEEN LEBANESE AND SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LEBANON

Recent evaluations have looked at WFP SFIE in Lebanon among Lebanese and Syrian refugee children (Jamaluddine et al., 2022; WFP, 2020c). A school snack was provided to Lebanese children (attending morning sessions) and Syrian refugee children (attending afternoon sessions). The studies found that the SFIE is associated with notable improvements in dietary diversity among both Lebanese and Syrian children. However, it was not evident that the school snack contributed to enhance **inter-group social cohesion** between Lebanese and Syrian refugee children primarily because they attended different school shifts in most instances (WFP, 2020c).

At the same time, the school snack was perceived to contribute positively to **intra-group social cohesion**, including a sense of belonging to the school community, in the Lebanese morning session children (Jamaluddine et al., 2022). The school snack distribution was also perceived to instil a feeling of equality between students in the same shift (WFP, 2020c: 35).

These findings underline an important distinction: **while the intervention supported social cohesion within a group, it did not foster cohesion between groups.**

This contrast is further illustrated by experiences from nutrition summer camps, where children from different nationalities and socio-economic backgrounds participated together. Despite the shared environment, these camps had limited effects on inter-group social cohesion, highlighting that proximity alone is insufficient. **Promoting meaningful social cohesion between groups requires intentionally designed activities**, such as mixed-group engagement, collaboration-based tasks, inclusive participation mechanisms, and safe spaces for dialogue, that are led by trained facilitators and that reflect the local context, address power dynamics, and are responsive to community feedback (WFP, 2020c: 35–36).

**Much of the research indicates that for interventions to promote peace and social cohesion there is a need for holistic responses from all partners to create comprehensive, enabling environments combined with packages of services tailored to the underlying needs** (WFP, 2022a: 11; WFP, 2020h).

This links to thinking through how school meals in emergencies can interact and complement other programmes, including social protection or disaster risk management programmes, that are scaled up in the face of an emergency (through vertical and/or horizontal expansion, among others), and what parts of the delivery system can be leveraged by school meals in emergencies in that context. This was also a recommendation

of the WFP Synthesis of Evaluations (WFP, 2022a), which nevertheless highlights that **where school meals in emergencies are appropriate, social protection systems may be, if not dysfunctional, then nascent**, as mentioned also in paragraph 4.3.

The Niger evaluation recommends creating guidance on how an integrated package of services and different modalities can operate in an emergency/conflict setting (WFP, 2020d: ix). Also, in Syria, three school meals in emergencies modalities were utilised to address the double challenge of low education indicators and food insecurity, namely: 1) the distribution of in-kind date bars; 2) cash-based transfers (CBT) for

‘Curriculum B’ students (those on an accelerated learning programme, which were mostly IDPs and returnees); and 3) the distribution of fresh meals (WFP, 2020e: vi).

More broadly, since school meals are an important programmatic component of a social protection system, **it is important to ensure a strong collaboration at country level between school meals, social protection and disaster-risk management efforts, ensuring that they are aligned when it comes to questions of conflict sensitivity, social cohesion and contributions to peace.**

## 5.5. Possible pathways of change

Through WFP-commissioned research, discussions within WFP and through this literature review, and building on the causal pathways of change proposed in WFP’s Technical Note (WFP, 2022b), **eight pathways of change have been articulated on how school meals can contribute to peace and social cohesion in FCAS.**

**Given the very limited evidence and likely high sensitivity of potential effects to differences in context or characteristics of target groups, these remain hypotheses to be tested** (WFP, 2022b: 6; 2020f: 11). For example, the Global Literature Review (WFP, 2020h) highlights how there is a lack of research and analysis concerning accountability to affected people (e.g. which groups receive emergency school feeding in conflict settings, which groups do not), and whether this has an impact on contribution to peace and social cohesion (e.g. schools that are targeted vs schools that are not). The document highlights that “differences between groups who receive or do not receive aid [may] have a stronger impact on peacebuilding than the impact of programmes on recipient groups themselves” (WFP, 2020h: 19). This lack of counterfactuals limits the understanding of the effects of school meals in emergencies (WFP, 2022b: 5).

The following boxes discuss each of the eight **pathways to change**, providing a **sample theory of change narrative** for each, with some **assumptions, key background and programming and monitoring suggestions**. These pathways are related to the areas of: education, protection, health and nutrition, and return to daily life (for pathway 1, 2 and 3); community cohesion and reduction of tensions (for pathway 4 and 5); economic resilience and equitable access to natural resources (for pathway 6 and 7); and citizen state trust (for pathway 8).

The pathways of change address different target groups. The key relevant **target groups**, as defined by WFP’s School Feeding Strategy 2020-2030 ToC (WFP, 2022c), but **specific to emergency settings**, including FCAS, are also highlighted. These include: **girls and boys; families, school management committees (SMCs) and communities; smallholder farmers and other actors in local food value chains; and Governments. The ultimate impact is seen as contributions to peace through social cohesion.**

Assumptions underlying these pathways include: schools remaining safe, accessible, inclusive and designed through a conflict-sensitive approach, active parents, school meals committees and community participation, functioning food value chains, government’s commitment, and the presence of complementary interventions from partners. These assumptions need to be regularly monitored as part of the program implementation.



## TARGET GROUP 1: GIRLS AND BOYS

### 1. Increased sense of normality, stability, and hope for a peaceful future among girls and boys



#### Assumptions:

- If schools open, remain open or reopen, are safe and accessible
- If schools are not used for other purposes
- If schools are inclusive
- If school meals are designed and delivered through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach including through an understanding of conflict drivers

**Background:** Schools and its services, including school meals, provide much-needed structure and routine within the turmoil of conflict, and can foster a sense of normality and purpose (Sousa et al., 2013). Opening schools in refugee and displacement settings and providing access to basic services can also provide a sense of normality and hope for a more peaceful future (UNHCR & WFP 2022: 98). School meals can provide an incentive for parents to send their children to school and increase attendance, which can in turn play an important role in supporting schools to stay open (or to reopen) in the aftermath of conflict, which can provide

a symbolic act and sense of normality for the children (such as in Niger (WFP, 2020d) and Mali (Aurino et al., 2019; Delgado et al., 2019)).

**Sample theory of change:** If schools remain open during or after a shock and school meals are provided, this will create a sense of normality and provide hope for a more peaceful future among girls and boys.

**How to programme/measure for it:** School meals programmes can form part of a context-adapted package of measures implemented to help children, whether they belong to the host community, are migrants, displaced or refugees, build and consolidate a sense of “normality” and “hope”, such as supporting children to articulate local peace initiatives and practically put them into action, inclusion of topics on diversity and tolerance for children in the curriculum (WFP, 2022b: 6). To measure the “sense of normality”, “hope” and “optimism” for a peaceful future, use community feedback to identify relevant indicators, acknowledging these may differ by

location and change over time. Monitor attitude shifts via surveys with Likert scales and qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups to explore reasons behind changes. Supplement with assessments of safety concerns and inquiries on decisions regarding children’s school attendance without the provision of meals. Conflict sensitivity risks are critical to consider here.

### 2. Reduced risks for girls and boys to leave school for reasons related to conflict or fragility



#### Assumptions:

- If school meals are accompanied by other specific measures to promote psycho-social wellbeing and ways to address protection risks of girls and boys affected by emergencies, fragility, and/or conflict
- If school meals are designed and delivered through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach including through an understanding of conflict drivers
- If school meals make school a more attractive option for both parents and children

**Background:** School meals programmes, by increasing the disposable income available for parents/caregivers, could lessen the “attractiveness” of negative coping mechanisms, such as child, early or forced marriage and child labour, but also recruitment by non-state armed groups. The assumption is that the provision of school meals makes schools a more attractive option to both parents and children, which is presumed to affect children’s propensity to be recruited into armed groups, since they are instead involved in school. Although there is evidence showing links between school meals



and enhanced attendance, there is a lack of evidence to show whether there are links between enhanced attendance and reduced recruitment into armed groups (WFP, 2022b: 7). There is some anecdotal evidence from both the DRC and Niger school feeding in emergency (SFIE) evaluations that parents and caregivers perceived school meals as having (indirectly) reduced the risk of recruitment of children into armed groups (WFP, 2020b; 2020d). But quantitative evidence on this remains weak, and the Synthesis of Evaluations concluded that any effects of school meals in emergencies on recruitment into armed groups “were likely highly sensitive to differences in context or characteristics of target groups” (WFP, 2022a: 11). Not only, it should be noted that this concern is likely to be more relevant for secondary rather than primary school students, which are normally not targeted by WFP school meals programmes. Nevertheless, in the long-term this remains a critical pathway. If children drop out of primary school, they are unlikely to transition to secondary school, which, in turn, increases their risk of engaging in criminal activities, in long-distance migration or in joining non-state armed groups.

**Sample theory of change:** If schools become a more attractive option for school-aged children and their parents/caregivers through the provision of school meals, then fewer school-aged children will engage in negative coping mechanisms.

**How to programme/measure for it:** There are limited approaches in use for monitoring activities that link school meals, increased attendance, and the prevention of recruitment into armed groups. Furthermore, there are difficulties in assessing the extent to which school meals programmes help prevent recruitment, especially as any evidence of a decrease in child recruitment would be hard to attribute solely to school meals, meaning that proxy indicators would have to be highly contextual (Delgado, 2020: 28). If school meals programmes are to have positive influences on preventing child recruitment into armed groups, then their design must be based on a strong understanding of which children are at highest risk of recruitment and the incentives for joining, as well as respecting sensitivities. Programmes would then need to target age ranges and locations appropriately, with a sound understanding of the incentives for joining armed groups. However, this is not consistent with WFP targeting criteria (WFP, 2022b: 7).

### 3. Increased interactions between girls and boys from different groups



#### Assumptions:

- If school meals are given to host communities, IDPs, refugees, and migrants girls and boys in an equitable manner
- If school meals are accompanied by other measures to promote social cohesion
- If school meals are designed and delivered through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach including through an understanding of conflict drivers

**Background:** A thorough understanding of conflict drivers, combined with a range of activities to enhance contact among children from different groups (host communities, IDPs and/or refugees), such as in shared lessons and sports activities, or eating together, could help building positive relationships. In some situations, schools may be one of few places where interactions between hostile groups is tolerated, and so can represent an entry point for building relationships. Behavioural changes will feed into

changes in attitudes and stereotypes, as this would require not only longer-term interaction activities, but also working simultaneously on deeper issues of division.

**Sample theory of change:** If girls and boys from different groups have equitable access to school health and nutrition interventions, including school meals, and participate in activities that foster contact, then they will build positive relationships among themselves.

**How to programme/measure for it:** Schools can become platforms for positive change, not just in the areas of health, nutrition and education, but more broadly. By convening children from different groups in eating, learning and playing together, by supporting them to articulate local peace initiatives and practically put them into action, by including topics on diversity and tolerance for children in the curriculum (WFP, 2022b: 6), by addressing

the social norms and structural barriers that influence the opportunities available to different members of the community, whether by sex, age, disability or other characteristic, and by involving their families and communities, school meals programmes can help build positive relationships across divided communities, assume a “whole of society” approach and stimulate a shift towards more equitable and inclusive socio-economic outcomes. For example, formative research as part of a Social Behavior Change

approach was used to identified barriers of successful integration of Colombian, Venezuelan (migrants) and children of other ethnicities. The fact that schools were considered safe places by most students in Colombia was a key enabler, highlighting the potential of schools to act as a platform for broader social change. Creative activities and dialogue with community stakeholders were used to find local solutions to promote positive change in knowledge, attitudes and practices related to inclusivity and nutrition.

## TARGET GROUP 2: FAMILIES, SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES AND COMMUNITIES

### 4.Improved relations and enhanced trust and collaboration between different groups through School Management Committees (SMCs)



#### Assumptions:

- If school health and nutrition services are available locally
- If parents and members of the communities are playing an active role in school meals
- If SMCs' membership is inclusive and reflects different groups, sex, age, disability, etc.

#### Background:

School Management Committees (SMCs) are normally established in all schools where school meals programmes are delivered, drawing on school staff, students and parents, and playing a central role in implementation and sustainability (WFP, 2022b: 8). In contexts of divided communities served by the same school and with representation from all different

groups on the SMC, the SMC provides an opportunity for collaboration across divides on a shared issue (feeding of children) (Delgado et al., 2019). This can provide opportunities for changes in attitudes from parents to ‘others’ and build relationships and trust among divided communities. There is potential for these effects to be sustained outside of the SMC and spillover to others in the community (WFP, 2022b). However, to improve social cohesion resulting from closer interactions between members of the school- and wider community due to participation in school meals activities (for example, through SMCs), there is a key prerequisite of a minimum level of participation by a critical mass of parents. Furthermore, the relevance of this causal pathway is highly dependent on context (De Ceglie et al., 2019; Goldwyn et al., 2019). It is most likely to be relevant in cases where divided communities live in close proximity and share schools (De Ceglie et al., 2019; Goldwyn et al., 2019); where levels of trust and cooperation are low (Goldwyn et al., 2019) and social capital is weak (De Ceglie et al., 2019); and where prejudice between groups is a significant driver of tensions (De Ceglie et al., 2019).

**Sample theory of change:** If parents from different groups interact within and collaborate through SMCs, then they will build relationships and trust across (potential) lines of division

**How to programme/measure for it:** In contexts where SMCs are thought to have the potential to contribute to peace, programmes need to be designed with a strong understanding of the context, whether the school serves a divided community, whether these different communities are represented in the SMCs, and whether it is feasible that collective work would help build bridges (WFP, 2022b: 8). Initial or sequenced trust-building activities may be needed to enable groups to work collectively across divides. Complementary actions which seek to build bridges across divided groups and address communities' needs could also be utilised to amplify any successes, such as literacy training for adults, nutrition and health campaigns, a meeting place for voluntary savings and loans groups, linking the SMC to community level peace actors. Further evidence on the causal pathway can be built by combining assessments of the attitudes of SMC members towards each other and feedback on the functioning / equality of participation, with conflict analysis and direct observations.



## 5.Strengthened role of SMCs as catalysts of peace building



### Assumptions:

- If parents and other members of the communities are playing an active role in school meals
- If SMCs membership is inclusive and reflects different groups, sex, age and disability, etc.
- If there is a minimum level of trust and willingness among SMC members to engage in collective action within the community

**Background:** SMCs have the potential to act as catalysts for peace and social cohesion within divided communities. In addition to their potential role in building relationships and trust along lines of division, SMCs can be strengthened and empowered to take on broader peacebuilding activities. By receiving training in conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation, SMC members can develop skills to address and resolve community conflicts. Linking SMCs with existing community peace actors and integrating their activities into the broader community peace agenda can extend their influence beyond the school environment. In divided communities where SMCs include representation from various groups, these committees can serve

as a microcosm for broader social cohesion. The collective work and trust-building within SMCs can model positive interactions and cooperation, which can then spill over into the wider community. Strengthening SMCs' role as peace actors can therefore contribute to reducing tensions and fostering social cohesion at the community level.

**Sample theory of change:** If SMCs are empowered and trained to act as peace actors, then they will be able to address and resolve conflicts beyond schools, including at the community level.

**How to programme/measure for it:** After having provided training in conflict resolution and facilitated trust-building activities that encourage collaboration and understanding among SMC members from different groups, it will be key to establish connections between SMCs and existing community peace actors and initiatives, and to encourage their inclusion in community peacebuilding forums and activities. In addition to becoming peace ambassadors, SMCs' members can also be involved in designing

and implementing community peace initiatives, such as dialogue sessions, community service projects, and awareness campaigns. Using tools such as surveys, focus group discussions, and

direct observations can be used to gather data both from the SMCs members and the broader community on the participation, engagement and effectiveness of SMCs as peace actors.

## TARGET GROUP 3: SMALLHOLDER FARMERS AND OTHER ACTORS IN LOCAL FOOD VALUE CHAINS, ESPECIALLY YOUNG PEOPLE AND WOMEN

### 6.Reduced reliance on destabilising income-sources by improving livelihoods of smallholder farmers & other actors along local food value chains through local procurement for school meals programmes



### Assumptions:

- if smallholder farmers and other actors along local food value chains have the resources, capacity and infrastructure to produce, procure, transport, process, prepare, and distribute school meals;
- If smallholder farmers and other actors along local food value chains are targeted through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach, including an understanding of conflict drivers.

**Background:** This builds on the broader ToC that "if livelihoods are enhanced and/or diversified, then this will contribute to improving economic opportunities and prospects for the future" (Delgado et al., 2019: 9). Supporting livelihoods in FCAS is widely used to build the capacities of individuals and communities to enhance their resilience to shocks, engage in sustainable livelihood strategies and contribute to long-term development (Delgado et al., 2019: 10). This broader outcome can link to local procurement for school meals programmes to enhance livelihoods among smallholder farmers (WFP,



2022b). This causal pathway of how enhancing livelihoods contributes to peace varies greatly between contexts, with anecdotal information from WFP Country Offices suggesting mixed experiences in linking HGSF to reducing the economic drivers of conflict (WFP, 2022b: 10). In Lebanon, by purchasing from disadvantaged Lebanese smallholder farmers and thus enhancing livelihoods, it was assumed this would lower tensions between refugee and host communities. However, the SFiE evaluation in Lebanon found that the economic reach to disadvantaged farmers was limited as some smallholder farmers could not reach the food standards required by WFP (WFP, 2020c). In Colombia and in the Philippines the programme deliberately procured from former combatants, to support an alternative sustainable livelihood/ socio-economic re-integration (WFP, 2022b). Overall, it can be assumed that by providing smallholders, and in particular young people, with local opportunities to develop their livelihoods and become full members of society, this can lower the risk of them adopting negative coping mechanisms, such as joining destabilising actors. However, it should not be assumed that all livelihoods strengthening activities will inevitably have peace outcomes. Intentionality, based on localised analysis, is essential in this regard, while more research is needed to understand the link.

**Sample theory of change:** If livelihoods are enhanced by linking smallholder farmers (and other actors) to school meals programmes through procurement of locally sourced food, then this will reduce reliance on destabilising income sources, such as conflict- or crime-related ones

**How to programme/measure for it:** A thorough understanding of the connections, relationships, tensions and influences between smallholder farmers (and other actors in the value chain) and (local) conflict is needed (for example via value chain analysis and conflict actor analysis) (WFP, 2022b: 10). Additional work may be required to build trust among divided communities to work collectively on one value chain. A basket of indicators including changes in livelihoods as well as changes in attitudes to known conflict issues/ other groups could reveal if there is any correlation between livelihoods and conflict, which could be probed through more narrative processes (such as focus group discussions or techniques such as Most Significant Change or contribution analysis) to understand if there are any causal links. A contextually adapted social cohesion score could be useful in assessing changes in attitudes to known conflict issues, inter- and intracommunity relations, and perceptions of WFP impact on these, while incidence of conflict could also be tracked, potentially through self-reporting among the target group.

## 7.Reduced distress migration by strengthening resilience of smallholder farmers & other actors along the local food value chains linked to school meals programmes



### Assumptions:

- If smallholder farmers and other actors along local food value chains have the resources, capacity, and infrastructure to prevent, mitigate, or address the negative impacts on livelihoods before, during or after a shock
- If smallholder farmers and other actors along local food value chains are targeted through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach, including an understanding of conflict drivers

**Background:** In FCAS, when local income opportunities vanish and recovery prospects are limited during or after a shock, people may resort to distress migration in search of work or food, sometimes facing heightened risks during their journey or in host communities. Strengthening livelihoods and resilience is a widely used approach to enable households to withstand and recover from shocks while reducing negative

coping strategies (Delgado et al., 2019). When both school meals programmes and school meals value chains are designed to adapt quickly and are able to resume or continue during fragility or conflicts, they can protect livelihoods, especially for young people and women, who are often among the most vulnerable to economic displacement. While evidence directly linking these efforts to reduced migration pressures remains very limited, it can be assumed that safeguarding livelihoods reduces the push factors that drive smallholder farmers and other local actors, particularly women and youth, to embark on risky migration journeys. However, peace and migration outcomes are not automatic: intentional, conflict-sensitive design based on localised analysis is essential, and further research is needed to confirm causal links (WFP, 2022b: 10).



**Sample theory of change: If smallholder farmers (and other actors) linked to school meals programmes can continue or resume procurement of locally sourced food during shocks, then livelihoods will be protected and the drivers of distress migration reduced.**

**How to programme/measure for it:** To achieve this pathway, strong linkages are needed between school meals and resilience programming. Programmatic interventions should sustain and adapt local procurement for school meals to function before, during, and after shocks. This includes protecting and promoting smallholder farmers, particularly young people and women, strengthening local food value chains and supporting smallholder farmers to

prevent or adapt to shocks, improve agricultural productivity, and diversify income streams WFP should work with national authorities and partners to integrate school meals and local food procurement into national disaster risk management and preparedness frameworks, ensuring that education services, including school meals, are maintained during crises. These frameworks should also provide for the participation of children, young people, teachers, and families in community response and recovery efforts, including the rapid resumption of school meals. Community feedback and complaints mechanisms should be in place to ensure transparency, identify challenges, and enable corrective action.

## TARGET GROUP 4: GOVERNMENTS

### 8. Increased state legitimacy and trust by citizens and/or beneficiaries

#### Assumptions:

- If governments invest in the education sector, including school health and nutrition services
- If citizens and communities are aware that school health and nutrition services are provided or supported by the government
- If school health and nutrition services are delivered through an equitable, conflict-sensitive approach

**Background:** This draws on the state-building concept that improving school meals as part of a nation-wide policy to increase access to education will enhance the state's performance-based legitimacy, strengthen government's responsiveness to citizens and the social contract between citizens and the state. In some circumstances, the failure to provide basic services (such as education, including school feeding) to certain groups has been a key

issue in the conflict, and thus the provision of education is seen as righting a historical wrong. The link between service delivery and state legitimacy has been reasonably well established in research (see for example research by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium; Nixon & Mallet, 2017), although it is recognised that service delivery is just one of many factors shaping people's views of government, with other factors carrying more weight (Nixon & Mallet, 2017). This research makes clear that the given service (education) has to have prominence in the life of affected communities to play a key role in strengthening the social contract. The quality and inclusiveness of service delivery are also important factors in shaping attitudes and can instil greater confidence in governments (Delgado et al., 2019). Others caution against establishing a direct causal link between increased service delivery and increased state legitimacy due to the

multiplicity of variables (Stabilisation Unit, 2019: 113). Furthermore, limited understanding of the role of the state in school feeding programming by students and parents may inhibit effects on attitudes towards the state as a result of improved school feeding provision, undermining the effect of this TOC (WFP, 2022b).

**Sample theory of change: If the government improves the delivery of essential services, such as education and school health and nutrition services, including school meals, then citizens will be more likely to engage with and trust the state, reinforcing the social contract between the state and the population.**

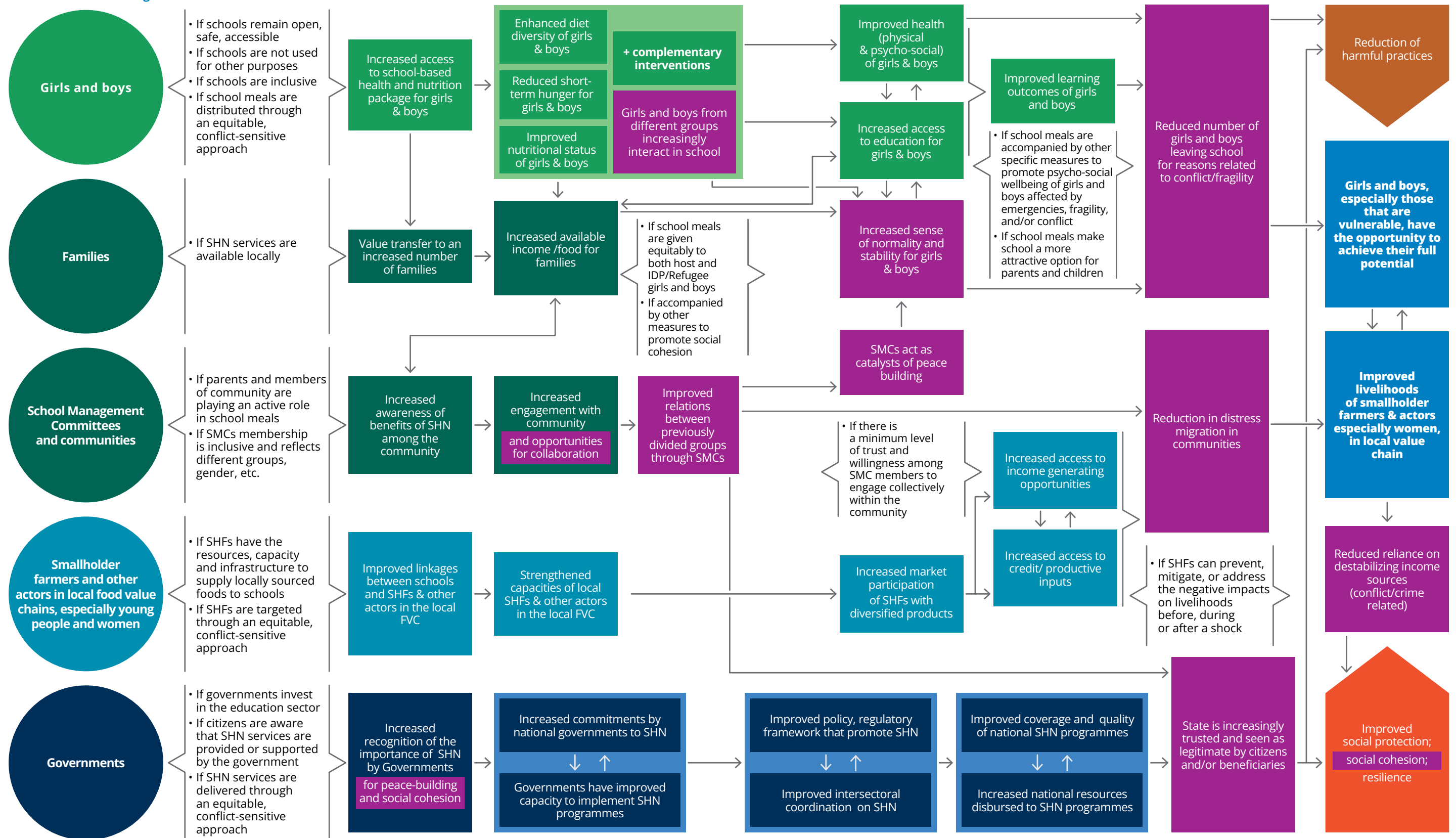
**How to programme/measure for it:** Where appropriate, WFP could better support engagement between School Management Committees (SMCs) and local governments to help encourage successful interactions, which could positively contribute to increasing trust between the population and the Government on a local and district level, as well as enhance the impact of school meals programmes. Assessing attitudes to state does create methodological challenges, but there are a range of options. WFP could build evidence by tracking attitudes within SMCs themselves towards local government, and levels of government's responsiveness and engagement. At a community level, Community Score Cards (CSCs) can be used to gather perceptions on accessibility, quality, and efficiency of service provision at the local level. If the service to be considered is the provision of school meals it would be important to understand the extent to which communities consider school meals as a state provided service, as they may contributing significantly to the meals themselves or the role of WFP in providing the school meals may reduce the extent to which this service is associated with the state (WFP, 2022b).

The global-level ToC for WFP's School Feeding Strategy 2020-2030 (WFP, 2022c) makes clear that WFP understands school meals programmes as a developmental intervention. This ToC references ultimate results relating to «improved social protection, social cohesion and resilience» and the «reduction of harmful practices», many of which relate to emergency contexts (but not exclusively). However, it does not refer to contributions to peace specifically, largely because, at the time of its development, WFP had not yet fully articulated its contributions to peace approach, including possible links to school meals. A forthcoming WFP's paper on Contributions to Peace (WFP, 2025) will demonstrate how the organisation can support contributions to peace across all its programming areas, including school meals, drawing on WFP's existing capacity and programming expertise<sup>12</sup>.

Because the focus of the ToC is on outcomes at the global level, rather than on modalities in specific contexts, there is no mention of school meals as a short-term safety-net in emergency contexts or specifically in FCAS. This global-level focus recognises that WFP delivers school meals in many varied contexts, with each programme facing its own unique challenges and conditions, target groups and potential pathways of change. This makes it difficult to combine diverse pathways of change in FCAS into a single ToC. However, an attempt has been made to include the assumptions and key outcomes from the identified eight pathways of change into the global-level ToC, adapted for FCAS<sup>13</sup>. The full ToC diagram can be found in Figure 3, below.

**Figure 3: WFP Amended Theory of Change for School Meals in Emergency, Fragile and Conflict-affected Settings**

Target Groups specific to emergencies, fragile or conflict-affected settings



Source: WFP developed with authors' inputs as well as with the support from Niamh O'Grady, Anna Hamilton and Sofia Shin from WFP

SMCs: School Management Committees  
FVC: Food Value Chain

SHFs: Smallholder Farmers  
SHN: School Health and Nutrition



# 6. Conclusions

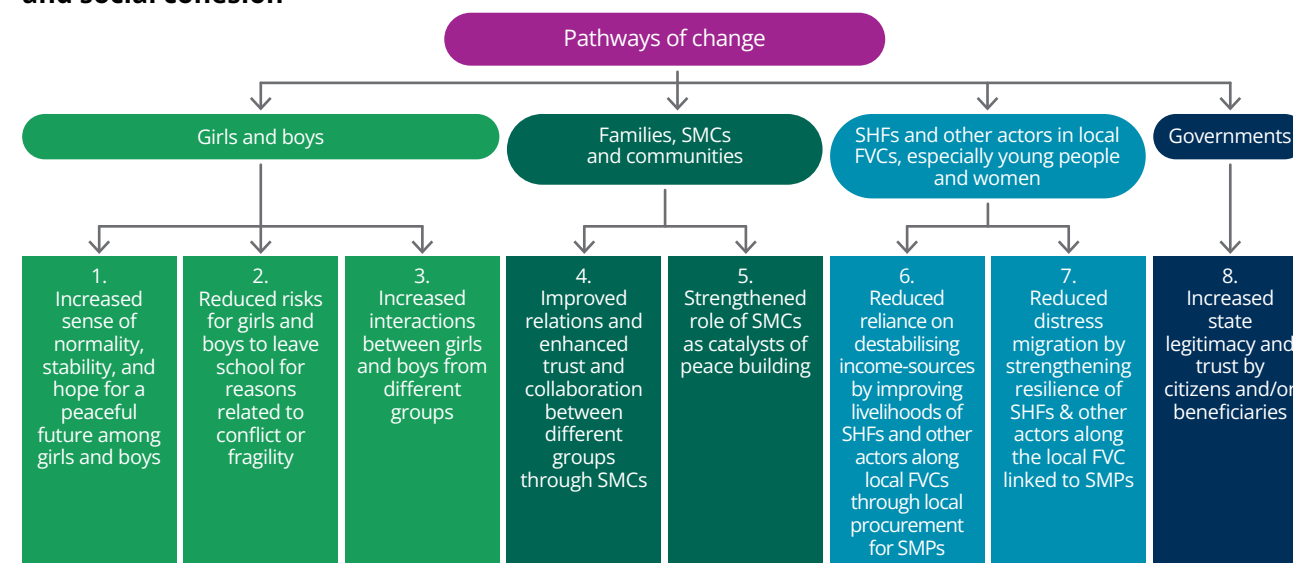
Conflicts and fragility are major drivers of food insecurity and disruption of education and other essential services. In FCAS, school meals programmes can serve as an emergency response intervention, which can support nutritional and educational outcomes. However, their potential contributions to peace and social cohesion remain largely unexplored.

Peace and social cohesion are complex and multifaceted, culturally shaped and contested, and not easily quantifiable. There are a number of challenges with trying to measure contributions to the improved prospects for peace, including: challenges of attribution; intangibility of results; fragility of results; complexity of causality; and constraints on data collection (Delgado et al., 2019: 21-22). Despite this, it is critical that WFP, as the foremost UN agency working on school meals, better captures the lessons learned from its programming to bolster the nascent evidence base on school meals programmes in FCAS, contribution to peace and social cohesion. While highlighting gaps in knowledge, this paper has observed a plausible correlation between a

carefully designed and conflict-sensitive school meals intervention and improved social cohesion. In light of this, **the paper has identified potential pathways of change to be further investigated and tested**, as shown in figure 4 below, **through which school meals in FCAS may contribute to positive changes in the lives of key target groups, with a specific focus to social cohesion and CtP as the ultimate impact.** In the follow up stage to this work, IDS and WFP will conduct case studies to contribute to the knowledge base on the implementation of school meals programmes in FCAS with the aim to:

- document current school meals programming, including conflict-sensitive practices;
- observe and refine the application of the proposed pathways of change;
- document entry points for conflict sensitivity and contributions to peace and social cohesion;
- identify lessons learned;
- formulate recommendations for future programme design, monitoring and evaluation for the assessed contexts and beyond.

**Figure 4: Pathways of change through which school meals could contribute to peace and social cohesion**



**FVCs:** Food Value Chains

**SMCs:** School Management Committees

**SHFs:** Smallholder Farmers

**SMPs:** School Meals Programmes

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# Appendix 1: Glossary

To ensure alignment with the existing WFP normative framework and tools the following definitions are largely taken from WFP's internal Glossary of Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding & HDP Nexus Terms (WFP, 2020f).

## Accountability to Affected People (AAP)

Taken from WFP's 2020 Protection and Accountability policy (2020): "WFP is first and foremost accountable to the people it serves; accountability, participation and empowerment through meaningful and consistent engagement are the key principles for mainstreaming protection" (WFP, 2020g: 4). WFP has an active commitment to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by the people it assists and people impacted by its interventions (i.e. AAP). WFP's commitment to AAP is founded on two main principles:

- Affected people have a right to be actively involved and have their needs and preferences reflected in the decisions that affect their lives.
- Meaningful engagement - that results in informed and empowered populations - makes food security and nutrition interventions more effective (WFP, 2023c: 5).

## Causes (root/structural) of Conflict

The root/structural causes of conflict are the historical, systemic, structural or foundational factors built into policies, structures and the norms of society, that provoke initial tensions and motivate actors to resort to violence (WFP, 2020f: 2).

## Conditions for Peace

The minimum social, economic, cultural, political and even personal conditions necessary to for sustainable peace. Linked to grievances about root/structural causes of conflict (WFP, 2020f: 2).

## Conflict

A system of competitive interactions between two or more parties (individuals, groups, states etc.) who pursue mutually incompatible goals, or compete for the same goal. Conflicts can be pursued violently (war, terrorist attacks etc.), or non-violently (litigation). Conflict is entrenched in human relations and is a natural phenomenon in the process of societal change. The WFP distinguishes between *armed conflict* (a conflict involving two or more parties who have resorted to mass violence in pursuit of their goals), *international armed conflict* (armed conflict between two or more states, regardless of declarations of war or even official recognition of the conflict), and *non-international armed conflict* (Armed conflict in which one or more non-state armed groups are involved) (WFP, 2020f: 2-3).

## Conflict Analysis

Conflict analysis is the examination of the various levels and types of conflicts existing in a given context. It offers an overall picture or objective snapshot of the conflict, the causes/drivers/triggers of the conflict and the main actors involved. It also analyses the drivers of peace and what connects people across divides (WFP, 2020f: 3; WFP, 2021a).

## Conflict Sensitivity

Exact definitions vary by organisation but the spirit of the concept remains the same: The ability of an organisation to: 1) understand the conflict context it operates in; 2) understand the interaction between its intervention and that conflict context; 3) act upon this understanding in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict (WFP, 2020f: 3).

## Contributions to Peace

The positive impact of deliberate efforts to address the causes or drivers of conflict and to support peace at the local, national, regional or international levels. Contributions to peace should be reflected in measurable changes in attitudes and behaviours, relationships, structures and institutions or cultural norms (WFP, 2020f: 3).

## Do No Harm (DNH)

An ethical principle (borrowed from medicine) to highlight the risk that humanitarian action could inadvertently cause harm, either by endangering individuals/communities who receive aid, or by exacerbating conflicts. Humanitarian policy concepts like Protection, AAP, Gender Equality and Conflict Sensitivity are all grounded in the Do No Harm approach. Additionally, the Do No Harm Framework is a specific tool to identify possible conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities to support peace, which includes the analysis of ‘dividers’ and ‘connectors’ (WFP, 2020f: 4).

## Emergencies

Urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event or series of events has occurred which causes human suffering or imminently threatens human lives or livelihoods and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event or series of events which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale. The event or series of events may comprise one or a combination of the following:

1. **sudden calamities** such as earthquakes, floods, locust infestations and similar unforeseen disasters;
2. **human-made emergencies** resulting in an influx of refugees or the internal displacement of populations or in the suffering of otherwise affected populations;

3. food scarcity conditions owing to **slow-onset events** such as drought, crop failures, pests, and diseases that result in an erosion of communities and vulnerable populations’ capacity to meet their food needs;
4. severe food access or availability conditions resulting from sudden **economic shocks, market failure, or economic collapse** — and that result in an erosion of communities’ and vulnerable populations’ capacity to meet their food needs; and
5. **a complex emergency** for which the Government of the affected country or the Secretary-General of the United Nations has requested the support of WFP (WFP, 2005: 4).

## Fragility

The inability of a state to fulfil its responsibilities and perform the functions necessary to meet citizen’s basic needs and expectations. Authorities in fragile states often suffer from a lack of legitimacy, authority, and capacities to provide basic services and protect citizens (WFP, 2020f: 4).

## Humanitarian, development and Peace nexus

The interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) actions (also known as the ‘Triple Nexus’). Linked to this is the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Approach, which covers cross-sectoral efforts to strengthen collaboration, coherence and complementarity between humanitarian, development and peace actions, particularly in FCAS. The approach seeks to capitalise on the comparative advantages and relevance of each of the three pillars in a given context in order to reduce people’s needs, risks and vulnerabilities more effectively, while also supporting peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The HDPN approach supports a shift in focus from meeting people’s humanitarian needs to ending needs (WFP, 2020f: 5).

## Peace

There is no universally recognised definition of peace. Different communities can have very different perceptions of peace, ranging from the absence of war to a society governed by justice, freedom and inclusion. The WFP glossary distinguishes between Negative Peace (the absence of war, conflict or mass violence), Positive Peace (the ability to prevent, manage or resolve conflict without violence by using political and social change processes), and Sustainable Peace (a sustainable socio-political condition in which the needs of all are taken into account, and outbreak, escalation or recurrence of conflict is prevented by addressing the root/structural causes of conflict and promoting reconciliation) (WFP, 2020f: 6).

## Peacebuilding

A range of measures undertaken to reduce the risk of lapsing/relapsing into conflict by strengthening national and local capacities for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding addresses the root/structural causes of conflict and overlaps significantly with conflict prevention (WFP, 2020f: 6).

## Risk

The WFP Glossary distinguishes between three areas of risk: *Acceptable Risk* (Any risk that a humanitarian organisation considers it reasonable to take in order to achieve their goals); *Conflict sensitivity risk* (Any risk that programming could inadvertently get caught up in, and contribute to, conflict); *Risk management* (The careful monitoring of risks and adjustment of programme, where necessary to mitigate impacts) (WFP, 2020f: 7).

## School meals

The provision of food (meals, snacks, or take-home incentives conditional upon school attendance) to children and/or their households through school-based programmes (WFP, 2022b: 4).

## Shocks

“Shocks jeopardise people’s ability to meet their essential needs; in turn, people’s vulnerability to shocks is heightened if their ability to meet their essential needs is already compromised” (WFP, 2021c: 32). Shocks can be covariate (affecting large numbers of people and/or communities at once) or idiosyncratic (that may affect individual households or household members). However, not every shock leads to a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

## Social Cohesion

The levels of trust, respect, tolerance, solidarity and equal opportunities in any society, and for the dignity and wellbeing of every person and the common good of all. This affects the political, social and economic spheres equally (WFP, 2020f: 7). It encompasses the quality of bonds and dynamics that exist within and between groups within a society. Groups can be distinguished in terms of regional, ethnic, or socio-cultural identities, religious and political beliefs, social class, or economic sector, or based on characteristics including, but not limited to, sex, age, disability, gender, race, ethnicity or indigeneity (WFP, 2025).

Social cohesion has both horizontal dimensions (encompassing bonding social capital, which is defined by intra-community relationships, and bridging social capital, which is defined by inter-community relationships) and vertical dimensions (identified as linking relationships that are state-centred, describing the degree of trust in national, sub-national, or local governments and institutional processes) (WFP, 2025).

## Violence

Force exerted for the purpose of injuring, damaging, or abusing people or property. The WFP Glossary further distinguishes the following categories: *structural or indirect violence*, *cultural violence*, *political violence*, *psychological violence*, and *direct violence* (WFP, 2020f: 7).



# Appendix 2: Further information for programme design

**Table 1: Questions to examine possible linkages between school feeding and peace/conflict**

INITIAL SECTOR LEVEL SCREENING QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY POSSIBLE MAJOR ISSUES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does exclusion / marginalization in education align with any identity group?</li> <li>• Do schools ensure equitable access to all groups? Are there certain types of schools we will not work with for any specific reason?</li> <li>• Do schools serve mixed communities, or are schools segregated in any way?</li> <li>• Is education a rallying call for any political / armed groups?</li> <li>• Are there conflict / political sensitivities around the content of curriculum?</li> <li>• Is the language of instruction a divisive issue? Are there religious tensions concerning education?</li> <li>• Are teachers and principals all drawn from a particular identity group?</li> </ul>	
DETAILED ANALYSIS TO INFORM PROGRAMME DESIGN – TARGETING	
Overlay schools selected with a mapping of the different identity groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the selection of schools disproportionately benefit / exclude any particular groups?</li> <li>• Do the selected schools include children from all different identity groups in the vicinity, or are any excluded? Do children attend different schools according to identity or other markers of difference?</li> <li>• Do any communities withhold their children from school?</li> </ul>
Could targeting reinforce division and exacerbate conflict or be leveraged to increase social cohesion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could targeting coincide / mirror divisions between communities?</li> <li>• Is it possible that the schools that cannot fulfil minimum criteria for school feeding may align with the most marginalised group? If the minimum criteria result in these schools remaining outside the programme, could this feed a wider sense of deprivation and alienation?</li> <li>• Are there other non-targeted schools in the vicinity? Might targeting result in students changing schools to access the programme, and what effects would this have on intergroup tensions and competition?</li> <li>• Can targeting be used to prioritize schools that bring together different groups (e.g. children from displaced and host communities or differentiated by other social markers) to increase exchange, bonding and bridging dimensions of social cohesion?</li> </ul>
Could school feeding reduce child recruitment into armed groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which children are at risk of recruitment? Why do they join armed group (what are the incentives)? How are they recruited and which groups do they join?</li> <li>• Can school feeding influence the incentives to recruitment?</li> </ul>

DETAILED ANALYSIS TO INFORM PROGRAMME DESIGN – WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LOCAL ACTORS	
What implicit messages are conveyed by working with different actors to deliver the school feeding programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could working only with public schools be perceived by armed groups or other groups as an abandonment of impartiality? Could it contribute to putting pupils, teachers and WFP staff and partners in any danger?</li> <li>• Could working in only government-controlled areas conflict with WFP's principled engagement based on needs alone?</li> <li>• Could local authorities take advantage of, and get political benefits from the programme (e.g. by claiming credit for bringing assistance to the school)?</li> <li>• Is the school perceived as close to any political / conflict party?</li> </ul>
What are the links between SMCs and local authorities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where SMCs engage with local authorities in administering the school feeding programme, what is the quality of that interaction?</li> <li>• How responsive is local government / local service providers to the needs and recommendations of SMCs? What else may be needed to ensure local authorities are receptive and responsive to the requests of SMCs?</li> <li>• What are the key issues that drive attitudes towards the state in this context? How important is the provision of education by the state in driving citizen attitudes towards and relations with the state? To what degree does school feeding influence citizens' satisfaction regarding state-provided education?</li> </ul>
DETAILED ANALYSIS TO INFORM PROGRAMME DESIGN – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	
What are the links / relationships among the SMC members?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where a school serves a divided community: Does the SMC that oversees the school feeding programming in this school have representation from different groups?</li> <li>• How does the SMC function – do representatives from all groups participate equally?</li> <li>• What else may be needed to strengthen relations across divides among SMC members?</li> <li>• In what ways could the SMC support peace more broadly (e.g. in strengthening community conflict resolution mechanisms or acting as peace ambassadors)?</li> </ul>
Could opening schools contribute to a sense of normality?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does this community perceive as a 'normal' situation, and how could schools / school feeding play a role?</li> <li>• How could schools / school feeding contribute to protection and emotional wellbeing of students and teachers (e.g. by raising awareness / creating a space for discussing SGBV, insecurity, abduction, trafficking and other possible conflict related trauma / violations)?</li> </ul>
DETAILED ANALYSIS TO INFORM PROGRAMME DESIGN - PROCUREMENT	
How could conflict actors and issues affect procurement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could procurement be captured by elites and exacerbate inequalities and unfair power relations?</li> <li>• Could required food quality standards favour the most privileged / advantaged groups to the detriment of SHFs? Could this create resentment? Is wider support and sequencing required to allow SHFs to benefit from the programme?</li> <li>• Could procurement outside of the community create resentment?</li> </ul>
DRAWING LESSONS FROM OTHER ACTORS	
What can be learnt from others operating in this context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What conflict sensitivity concerns have they faced?</li> <li>• In what ways could school feeding support peace?</li> </ul>

Source: WFP, 2022b: 20-21.



# Endnotes

1

WFP defines school meals as “the provision of food (meals, snacks, or take-home incentives conditional upon school attendance) to children and/ or their households through school-based programmes” (WFP, 2022b: 4). A range of complementary terms are used for food assistance delivered through education systems, such as school feeding, school-based programmes (SBP), school feeding programmes (SFP), food-for-education (FFE), school health and nutrition (SHN), school health and school feeding (SHSF), and, for food assistance delivered in response to shocks and emergencies, emergency school feeding (ESF), school feeding in emergencies (SFIE) and school meals in emergencies. There is no difference between the terms ESF, SFIE and school meals in emergencies: the former was previously used in WFP, while SFIE and school meals in emergencies are now taking precedence to signal that it is not a different model or programmatic area from ‘regular’ school feeding, although the objectives and outcomes may differ in emergency contexts (WFP, 2022b). Hence, this paper uses the term school meals in emergencies (and occasionally SFIE), as it is taking precedence.

2

Fragility and conflict are different but interconnected. For further discussion see paragraph 4 below on Terminology and the Glossary in Appendix 1.

3

Complex emergencies, as defined by WFP, encompass situations where government intervention is insufficient to address the scale of human suffering or threats to lives and livelihoods, often requiring international support. However, this definition may not fully capture the intricate dynamics at play in such crises. Drawing on David Keen’s analysis on complex emergencies (2008), it is important to recognise that these situations often involve conflicts where certain groups or power structures benefit from the continuation of unrest. These beneficiaries may derive economic, political, or psychological advantages from ongoing conflicts, thereby complicating efforts towards peace and social cohesion. This insight is crucial for understanding the limitations and potential of social interventions like school meals programmes. While these programmes can make significant contributions to community stability and individual well-being at the micro level, their impact on broader peace efforts may be constrained by the interests of powerful actors who stand to gain from continued instability. WFP’s focus, therefore, remains on tangible peace contributions that can be directly attributed to their interventions, acknowledging that the broader political and economic dynamics that fuel complex emergencies are beyond the scope of their immediate influence but essential to consider in their overall strategy.

4

In the 2017–2021 WFP Strategic Plan, strategic outcomes were framed around three focus areas: crisis response; resilience building; and response to root causes. The Strategic Evaluation (WFP, 2021b) conducted a structured review to assess under which focus area school feeding was presented across all CSPs.

5

See Glossary in Appendix 1 for definitions of “violence” and “peace”.

6

Or adaptive social protection (ASP). SRSP means proactively anticipating and planning for a range of potential shocks, by putting in place an appropriate set of options to respond through existing or parallel programmes (i.e. preparedness) and providing support during the shock (i.e. responsiveness), whilst also performing the routine function of a social protection system (i.e. responsiveness), and contributing to resilience building of individuals, communities and systems (i.e. preparedness and recovery) (WFP & UNICEF, 2023).

7

For example, the Global Evidence Review concluded that “there is little evidence that [school meals in emergencies] on its own improves social cohesion or supports peacebuilding” (WFP, 2020h: 24).

8

In Niger, WFP only targeted formal Government primary schools for SFIE support, even though children in the same age groups attending other types of schools faced identical food security and educational needs. There were some informants who considered that the focus on Government primary schools in a conflict setting created a risk of armed incursions and destruction of schools (WFP, 2020d: 10).

9

For example, conflicts around the management of school feeding in emergency (SFIE) in some communities in Niger caused tensions between parents and school management and also between displaced and host communities, related to the added burden of SFIE management (financial and in-kind contribution requirements for SFIE functioning) (WFP, 2020d: 39).

10

In the DRC evaluation, it was found that there was some discontent among parents of non-school feeding schools in the Bwisha region, who felt that there was not sufficient justification for why WFP was providing school feeding only to a minority of schools here, especially as these were not necessarily serving the most vulnerable populations (WFP, 2020b: 16). This discontent is also reflected in anecdotal evidence from Colombia, which found tensions growing in host communities over the perceived different treatment of migrants/refugees compared with host communities. Parents reported tensions where migrant children received food assistance via school meals, but Colombian children only received assistance if they met the targeting criteria.

11

WFP is also in the process of conducting a strategic evaluation of WFP’s support to refugees, IDPs, and migrants.

12

At the time of writing, the Contributions to Peace paper (WFP, 2025), which has been finalized and published, was still in draft form.

13

The elements in orange in the ToC represent the assumptions and outcomes from the pathways of change, which complement the original global-level ToC.

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