

Chapter 4

The global and strategic role of WFP in school health and nutrition



A girl from Tajikistan prepares for lessons. WFP/Giulio d'Adamo

WFP's role and policy on school meals has evolved and matured over the last 20 years, making school meals one of the organization's flagship programmes and one of its best documented and evidence-based programme areas. In 2020, WFP took deliberate steps to strengthen and more clearly define its leadership role in school meals globally by launching a ten-year strategy that was expected to change the way WFP:

- worked and acted in partnership; sharpening its advocacy, convening and influencing capacities so it could become a facilitator of global, regional and country efforts on school meals and school health and nutrition; and
- worked with governments, increasing the sustainability and institutionalization of its efforts through a better understanding of national priorities and challenges, better use of evidence and an enhanced focus on strengthening national systems and plans.

Five years on, this chapter presents data and qualitative information to assess progress on the implementation and take up of the strategy. Overall, the information shows how WFP has evolved by placing governments at the centre of its efforts; stepping up its role as a convener and facilitator of partnerships; and investing in its capacities to provide technical assistance and policy support. This chapter includes some indicators and data that are not tracked by WFP in its corporate results framework, illustrating how additional investments in measurement are needed to fully understand the extent of WFP's contribution to this area of work.

One of the most important outcomes of WFP's ten-year strategy is the School Meals Coalition. Established in 2021, the Coalition stands out for its innovative approach to multilateral collaboration. Taking a systems and multisector approach, the Coalition is a network with more than 108 governments (rather than the UN system) as its centre. It is an evolving community that shares good practices and optimizes cooperation between countries to support an upscaling strategy.

As its secretariat, WFP plays a supporting role, helping to create the conditions for the Coalition to function and thrive. As envisioned in the strategy, WFP's shift from transactional or operational partnerships to more strategic and collaborative approaches has led to a vibrant ecosystem of more than 140 partners that interact and leverage each other's capacities. The Coalition's partners now include: UN agencies, international financial institutions and development banks (including the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank), NGOs, research institutions, foundations and many more.

A renewed commitment towards the institutionalization of school meal programmes has led to a substantial increase in nationally owned and sustainable programmes, with WFP support, and a shift in WFP's own operational portfolio. For example, in 2020, 40 percent of WFP-supported low-income countries did not have a school meals policy and had not yet decided to prioritize the programme or embed it in national structures. By 2024, that figure had reduced to 15 percent leaving few low-income countries without a national policy or legal framework in place. In most cases, the drafting and design of these documents was undertaken with WFP's technical assistance and support.

Overall, total school meal expenditure (in absolute dollar value) across WFP-supported countries has risen by more than US\$187.5 million since 2020. There is an increase in funding across all categories of funding sources, including an increase of nearly US\$140 million in national budget expenditure, reflecting the growth in government investment in countries with WFP presence and support.

In 2024, a total of 139 million children received school meals in 78 WFP-supported countries,¹ up from 108 million in 2020. WFP direct operational investment has remained relatively stable during this time, which means that the increase of 31 million children receiving school meals over the last four years is primarily due to an expansion of government-owned and funded programmes, supported by WFP.

¹ The figure refers specifically to countries where WFP supports school meal programmes. More generally, WFP is present in more than 78 countries globally.



A student from Mozambique learns about local foods.
WFP/Ana Mato Hombre

Through its technical assistance efforts, WFP's presence in 78 countries means that it can indirectly and efficiently reach and improve the conditions of these 139 million children, for example, by helping governments improve the quality and diversity of the food they provide through school meals and/or implementing additional quality enhancements such as food fortification.

When looking at direct operational assistance, the composition of WFP's portfolio has also changed, again reflecting the shift towards government ownership and sustainability as forecast in the strategy. In 2013, WFP reached approximately 20 million children with school meals, distributed evenly between fragile/low-income contexts (10 million children) and middle-income contexts (the other 10 million children). Today, WFP has almost halved the number of children it supports in middle-income countries, reflecting the commitment to national ownership and gradual handover, while scaling up support in fragile contexts where operational capacities are weak. In 2023, WFP provided support to approximately 21 million children, with the majority in fragile/low-income category settings (approximately 15 million).

This shift in focus underscores WFP's evolving role in supporting the most vulnerable and highlights its commitment to adapting programming to address the complex realities of fragile and low-capacity contexts. In response to the growing scale and intensity of emergencies, WFP is also leveraging its operational capabilities to support governments in using school meal programmes in fragile and conflict-affected areas. In countries with low capacity or high vulnerability, WFP continues to provide high-quality, context-driven programmes while ensuring safeguarding measures are in place to protect children, especially girls. WFP's future programming will focus on integrating humanitarian, development and peace efforts by enhancing national capacities; promoting home-grown and climate-resilient approaches; and piloting multisectoral interventions to strengthen emergency preparedness and recovery, with the ultimate goal of transitioning its school meal operations to national ownership.

These efforts and the evolution of WFP's approach were formalized in WFP's new School Meals Policy, which was approved by WFP's Executive Board in late 2024. The policy reflects the growing ambition of governments worldwide, sharpens WFP's approach and institutionalizes its global leadership role, recognizing the School Meals Coalition as the driving force behind international efforts. Over the next few years, WFP will continue to play a leadership role in this growing policy area, together with an extensive partnership network. This chapter unpacks how WFP is responding to the evolving and thriving ecosystem that it helped to create.

4.1 WFP's role as the School Meals Coalition secretariat and the expansion of its advocacy capacities

Leveraging its global presence and expertise, WFP can influence decision making and policy setting at global, regional and local levels, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable people. A compelling example of the catalytic power of WFP's advocacy is the School Meals Coalition, which has been instrumental in driving forward the school meals agenda in countries and positioning the topic on the development agenda globally.

Since 2021, WFP has augmented its school meals advocacy, communications and partnerships capacity within the School Meals and Social Protection Service at WFP headquarters in Rome. This dedicated team serves as the secretariat for the School Meals Coalition, with strategic guidance from the task force. Complementing this centralized capacity, WFP also provides support to Coalition member countries through efforts at regional and country levels.

As the School Meals Coalition continues to grow, now counting 108 member states and over 140 partner organizations, the secretariat, like the root system of a forest, helps to feed, animate and orchestrate action across the entire system. It maintains and develops relationships, manages the flow of information and creates opportunities for members to connect to each other. This includes outreach to new members; organizing periodic meetings and events; keeping stakeholders informed, empowered and motivated to engage with key advocacy and communications opportunities; and helping to connect initiatives and avoid duplication of efforts.

In close collaboration with the WFP global network of offices and staff, the secretariat provides initial support to regional initiatives and networks, together with regional bodies/organizations and existing regional partnerships, with a focus on regional peer-to-peer learning and support.

A local farmer in Madagascar supplies tomatoes to schools. WFP/Caitkie Vaghjee



WFP undertakes the following roles as the secretariat for the School Meals Coalition:

1. Strategic direction: Since 2021, the secretariat has provided the overall strategic direction for the Coalition, under the guidance of the three co-chairs and task force. Although this effort is led by governments, WFP provides the strategic foundation for the Coalition as the lead international organization on school meals. This includes publishing the fourth edition of the *State of School Feeding Worldwide* report (past editions include 2013, 2020 and 2022) to track the situation globally, understanding the key bottlenecks and challenges for implementation, and positioning the issue on global agendas. The secretariat has helped the various initiatives to establish themselves and has launched and facilitated coordination among them. The secretariat provides substantive support to each initiative, ensuring coordination with various stakeholders in the Coalition's ecosystem, including WFP's country and regional offices.

2. Coordination and dialogue setting: The secretariat supports Coalition member states and partners, maintains and develops relationships, and keeps partners informed and connected. A large part of the dialogue and agenda setting happens through regular meetings of various parts of the Coalition. Since 2021, the secretariat has organized 46 virtual meetings of the task force, the working group and the partners' group (combined) to strategically define the Coalition's work and set priorities, showcase country efforts and strengthen connections. Once a year, there is an in-person meeting at the ministerial level of the task force or of the Coalition as a whole. Since 2021, the secretariat has organized two task force meetings (in Helsinki 2022 and Nairobi 2024) and a summit of the entire Coalition (Paris 2023), with Brazil hosting the next summit in 2025. These events are political and strategic, creating momentum that is then carried across the Coalition system, informing country, regional and global priorities.

3. Communications and network management: The secretariat manages the Coalition's website, social media and newsletter, ensuring that all members and partners have access to key documents, calendars of events and assets for effective advocacy and to build connections. The secretariat has helped to secure coverage from global outlets such as CNN, The Guardian, The Economist, Associated Press and Forbes, among many more regional, national and language-based outlets. In 2024, the Coalition's social media covered 70 percent of all Coalition member states. Amplification by stakeholders (including ministers, ambassadors and multilateral organizations) expanded the reach and impact of communication efforts, demonstrating strong alignment with the Coalition's vision and objectives.

4. Advocacy and policy dialogue: The secretariat encourages and provides support to countries in formulating their national commitments to the School Meals Coalition. To date, 54 countries have submitted national commitments to the Coalition, which include more than 400 actions across policy, financing, institutional set up, programme design, coverage, evidence and data, and advocacy and partnerships. Most countries align across at least three of these categories and many express determination to achieve universal coverage by 2030. Through WFP's network of country, regional and global offices, the secretariat supports countries to enhance the scale and quality of their school meal programmes by providing technical support, and connecting countries with suitable partners, accelerating assistance and fostering peer-to-peer engagement.

At the regional level, the Coalition has gained significant traction. The secretariat has supported the African Union and the emergence of regional networks. Regional dialogues and events have led to the creation of regional school meal networks, where countries shared best practices and supported each other's commitments. Examples include the school meals events organized by ECOWAS in 2023 and 2024; the launch of the East Africa regional school meals network in Rwanda; the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Meeting hosted by Brazil in 2023 and Mexico in 2024; the European Summit hosted by Ukraine; and the Southeast Asia Summit hosted by Cambodia in November 2024. Regional meetings were also held in Southern Africa.

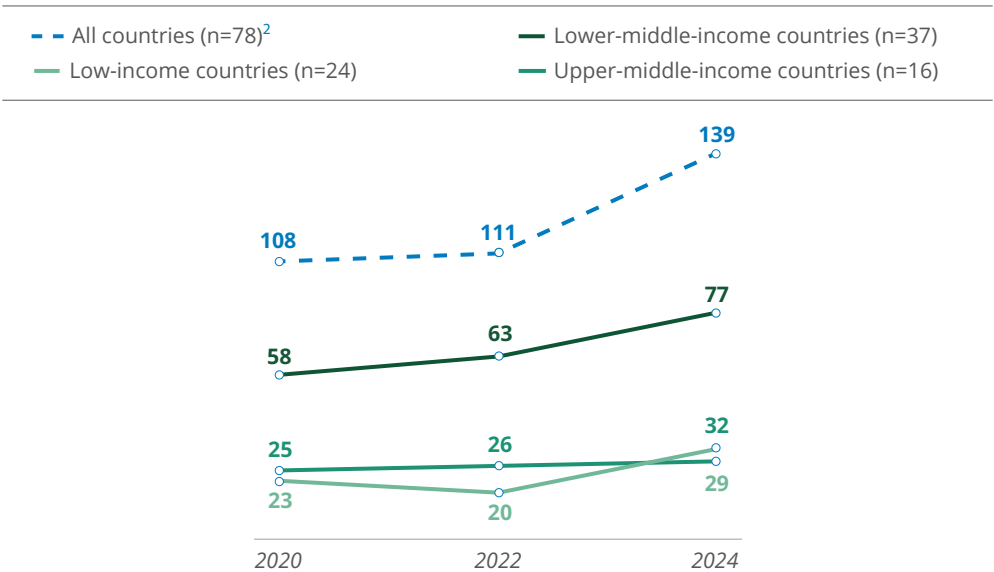
4.2 WFP’s contribution to the expansion and strengthening of national school meal programmes

In 2024, a total of 139 million children received school meals in 78 WFP-supported countries, up from 111 million children in 2022 (see Figure 4.1). Figure 4.2 shows this expansion – driven by government-led programmes as well as those implemented with WFP and partner support – was most significant in lower-middle-income countries, where 14 million more children were reached; followed by increases of 12 million in low-income countries and 3 million in upper-middle-income countries. This increase is partially attributable to WFP’s technical support and advocacy roles, and the global momentum created by the School Meals Coalition.

Figure 4.1

Number of children (in millions) reached by school meal programmes in countries supported by WFP

Over 139 million children received school meals in 78 WFP-supported countries in 2024 which is an increase from previous years.



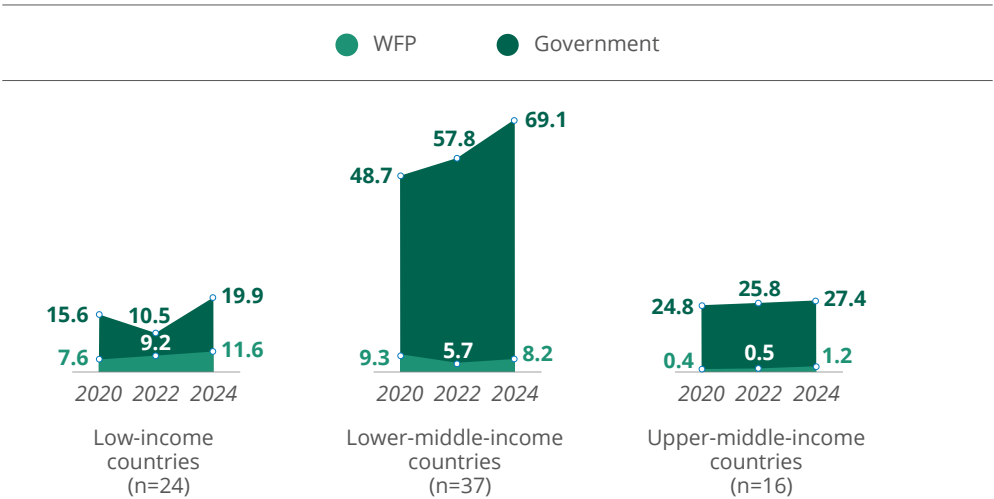
Sources: Direct government data, GCNF Global Surveys, WFP (estimates, Annual Country Reports), World Bank (2018).

² Venezuela is included in the total (n=78) but not in the income level breakdown, as it does not have an assigned income level category.

Figure 4.2

Number of children (in millions) reached by school meal programmes in countries supported by WFP (2020–2024) by income group

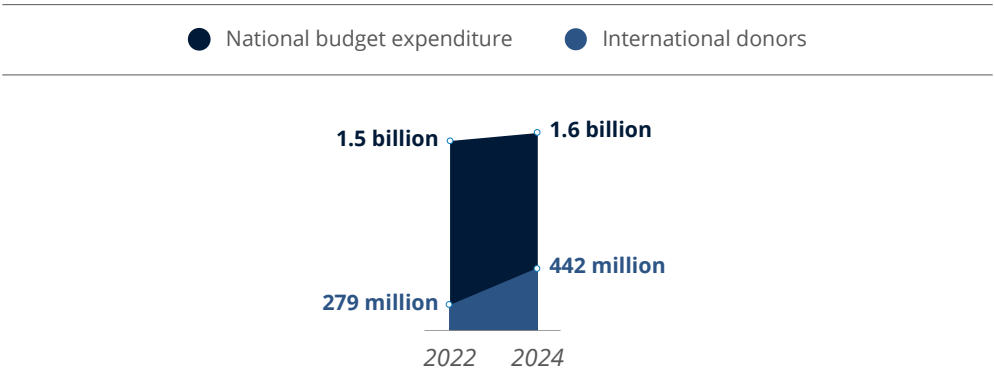
The scale-up of school meal programmes, including those implemented with WFP and partner support, was most significant in lower-middle-income countries, where 14 million more children were reached.



Sources: Direct government data, GCNF Global Surveys, WFP (estimates, Annual Country Reports), World Bank (2018).

National investments in school meals have also grown. Twenty-four WFP-supported countries increased their domestic funding for school meals between 2022 and 2024. Figure 4.3 shows the breakdown by funding sources and Figure 4.4 by income categories. Overall, across WFP-supported countries, total school meal expenditure – in absolute dollar value – rose by more than US\$240 million between 2022 and 2024. In absolute terms, there is an increase in funding across all categories of funding sources, including an increase of nearly US\$65 million in national budget expenditure. However, during this period, the largest increase in funding was from international donors whose contributions in 2024 were substantially higher compared to 2022.

Figure 4.3
Investment in school meal programmes in countries supported by WFP
Total investment in school meal programmes rose by more than US\$240 million between 2022 and 2024.³



Sources: Direct government data, GCNF Global Surveys (2021, 2024).

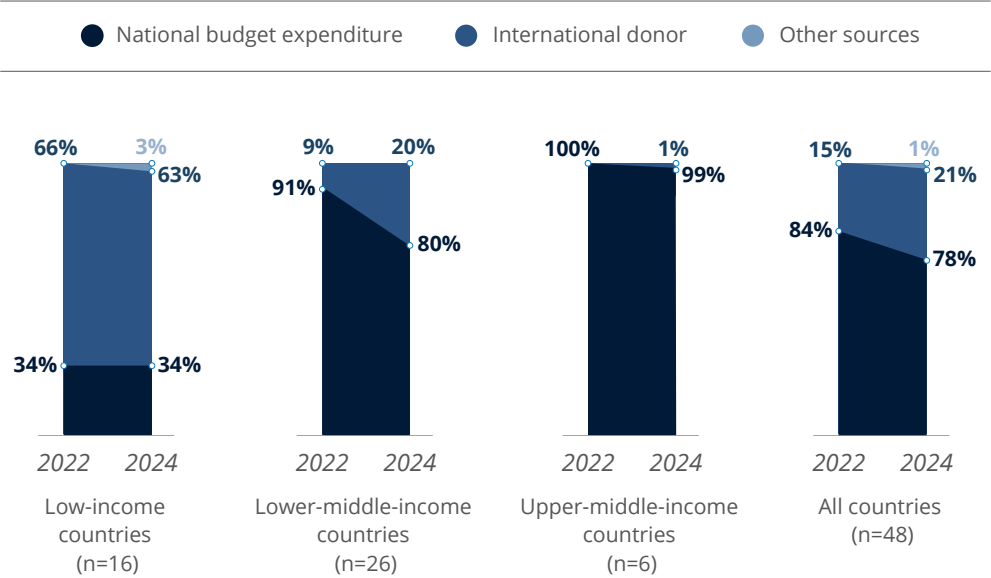
Figure 4.4 shows a modest downward trend in the percentage of funding coming from national budget expenditure and a corresponding slight increase in the percentage coming from international donors. This trend was most pronounced in lower-middle-income countries, which saw an 11-percentage point shift towards donor funding, while changes in upper-middle and low-income countries were much smaller.

³ Figure 4.3 presents funding contributions from national government budgets and international donors only. The total investment increase figure of US\$240 million also considers additional sources such as national donors, private sector contributions, and other sources which are not represented in the figure.

Figure 4.4

Change in funding sources in countries supported by WFP

Domestic funding for school meals in lower-middle-income countries has slightly decreased, while international donor support has slightly increased.



Sources: Direct government data, GCNF Global Surveys (2021, 2024).

With WFP support, programmes in low and lower-middle-income countries are being progressively institutionalized under national governments, while WFP continues to implement school meal programmes in fragile and conflict settings. To support growing national ownership, WFP has provided technical assistance, policy analysis and capacity strengthening, helping countries such as Armenia, Iraq, Cambodia and Benin transition to increasingly nationally owned and financed school meal programmes.

WFP has also facilitated South-South and Triangular Cooperation; seconded staff to governments; advocated for the expansion and improvement of national school meal programmes; facilitated regional and national multisectoral consultations; conducted national capacity assessments; and convened partners to support governments.

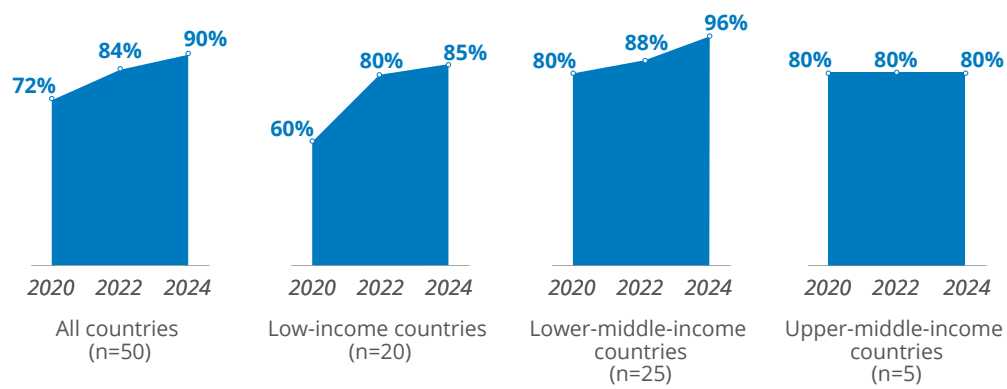
Sustained policy engagement by WFP and partners has contributed to strengthened national frameworks. Based on the most recent data, 59 countries (where WFP supported school meal programmes) have adopted national policies, laws or strategies, representing 92 percent of countries with available information (n=64). Since the last *State of School Feeding Worldwide* publication in 2022, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Senegal and Ukraine have introduced new school meals policies, signalling increased political will and deeper institutionalization.

Figure 4.5 illustrates the changes in national policy frameworks across income groups. While there is an overall 6 percentage point increase from 2022 to 2024 in countries with school meal policies, the growth is especially prominent among lower-middle-income countries, which saw an 8 percentage point increase, while upper-middle-income countries maintained an already high rate of 80 percent.

Figure 4.5

Change in policy frameworks in countries supported by WFP

Increase in the adoption of a school meals policy is prominent among lower-middle-income countries, which saw an 8 percentage point increase from 2022 to 2024, while upper-middle-income countries maintained an already high rate of 80 percent.



Sources: GCNF Global Surveys, WFP.

WFP has also collaborated with regional bodies, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to issue guidelines on school meals and school health and nutrition, which feature local procurement as a key component³⁶ (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1

The ASEAN Minimum Standards and Guidelines for the School Nutrition Package

The Minimum Standards and Guidelines for the School Nutrition Package, launched in 2024, provide a comprehensive framework to enhance the nutritional well-being of school-aged children across ASEAN member states. Developed with support from WFP and UNICEF, the guidelines outline essential standards for implementing, monitoring and enforcing school nutrition programmes. The package emphasizes five key action areas: access to nutritious foods, a healthy school environment, health and nutrition services, nutrition literacy and promoting regular physical activity. School meals are a central component, designed to ensure that children receive balanced diets that support their physical and cognitive development. By sourcing food locally, the guidelines also aim to encourage ASEAN governments to boost local economies and support smallholder farmers. The standards advocate for multisectoral collaboration, involving education, health, agriculture and social welfare sectors, to create a holistic approach to child nutrition. This initiative reflects regional bodies' commitment, especially ASEAN's commitment, to addressing malnutrition and fostering a healthier future for their young populations.

³⁶ <https://asean.org/book/minimum-standards-and-guidelines-for-the-asean-school-nutrition-package/>

Support for government information systems

Two examples of WFP-supported government information systems are provided below.

Jordan's National School Feeding Programme is implemented by the Ministry of Education with WFP's support. It is the largest safety net targeting children in Jordan, supporting 520,000 students with school meals and snacks on a daily basis. The National School Feeding Programme is implemented using two modalities: (i) fortified date bars; and (ii) the Healthy Meal model. The Healthy Meal model procures ingredients from local smallholder farmers and bakers. Ingredients are cleaned and packaged in ten community-based kitchens that employ 250 vulnerable women. The Healthy Meal model includes a nutrition-sensitive, age-appropriate Social Behaviour Change curriculum that uses interactive games and messages to raise awareness among children and their parents of good nutrition habits.

In line with the priorities of Jordan's National School Feeding Strategy (2021–2025), WFP supports various capacity and systems strengthening initiatives to gradually handover the programme to the Ministry of Education. This has included the development of a school meal module within the Ministry of Education's data management system, EMIS. WFP partnered with UNESCO and the Government of Jordan to design the module in line with the National School Feeding Programme monitoring framework; and conducted a training of trainers course to equip staff and directorate-level focal points across the country on how to properly use and populate the system. The school meal module will help strengthen data quality and monitoring of the national programme, enabling the Government of Jordan to make evidence-based decisions.

WFP's Multi-Country Office for the Caribbean provides technical assistance to countries in the region to integrate school meals data into educational databases, including digitalization support for the education sector in Jamaica.

Box 4.2**Southern African Development Community School Health and Nutrition Toolkit**

In 2024, the Southern African Development Community unveiled its School Health and Nutrition Toolkit, transforming the community's School Meals Guidelines and AUDA-NEPAD Home Grown School Feeding Guidelines into actionable advice for member states. The toolkit offers comprehensive guidance, tools and resources to help the community's member states develop effective national mechanisms and action plans to enhance school health and nutrition programmes. Designed for the education sector with a multisectoral approach, the toolkit primarily targets policymakers and programme managers in education and other key sectors involved in improving children's education, health and nutrition.

Developed by the Southern African Development Community's secretariat in collaboration with WFP, FAO, UNICEF, WHO, UNESCO, UNFPA and AUDA-NEPAD, the toolkit aligns with the WHO Health Promoting Schools Framework and the Global Standards for Health-Promoting Schools. It also incorporates good practices from the Focusing Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH) and SABER-SHSF frameworks. The toolkit provides evidence-based recommendations and practical tools to help member states identify and address gaps in school health and nutrition policies and programmes.

4.3 WFP's operational support to countries

In 2023, WFP worked with governments in 61 countries to directly reach 21.4 million schoolchildren – 48 percent of whom were girls – with nutritious school meals, take-home rations and cash-based transfers (see Map 4.1 for the geographical reach of WFP's school meal programmes). This is almost 6 million more children than in the last *State of School Feeding Worldwide* report. This increase may mean that WFP's operations are recovering as pandemic-related challenges ease, but also indicate the increased need for WFP's direct support, often in fragile contexts.

Of the 61 countries, 40 were experiencing crisis and/or receiving humanitarian assistance. In such settings, WFP continues to scale up its operational support, remaining agile in responding to changes in context and implementing school meals as a critical safety net. Since 2013, WFP has increased direct assistance to cover approximately 50 percent more children. For example, in Yemen, where WFP implements one of its largest school meal operations, WFP provided fortified date bars/biscuits and on-site meals to 1.9 million children in 2023. The programme reached over 4,600 schools – its largest coverage yet – resuming in 129 schools that were previously inaccessible due to conflict and expanding to 104 new schools.⁴

Over the past few years, the number of children affected by crises has grown. Despite the increased coverage of WFP's programmes, funding to support humanitarian efforts in emergencies is not keeping pace with growing need.

⁴ WFP Yemen Annual Country Report 2023.

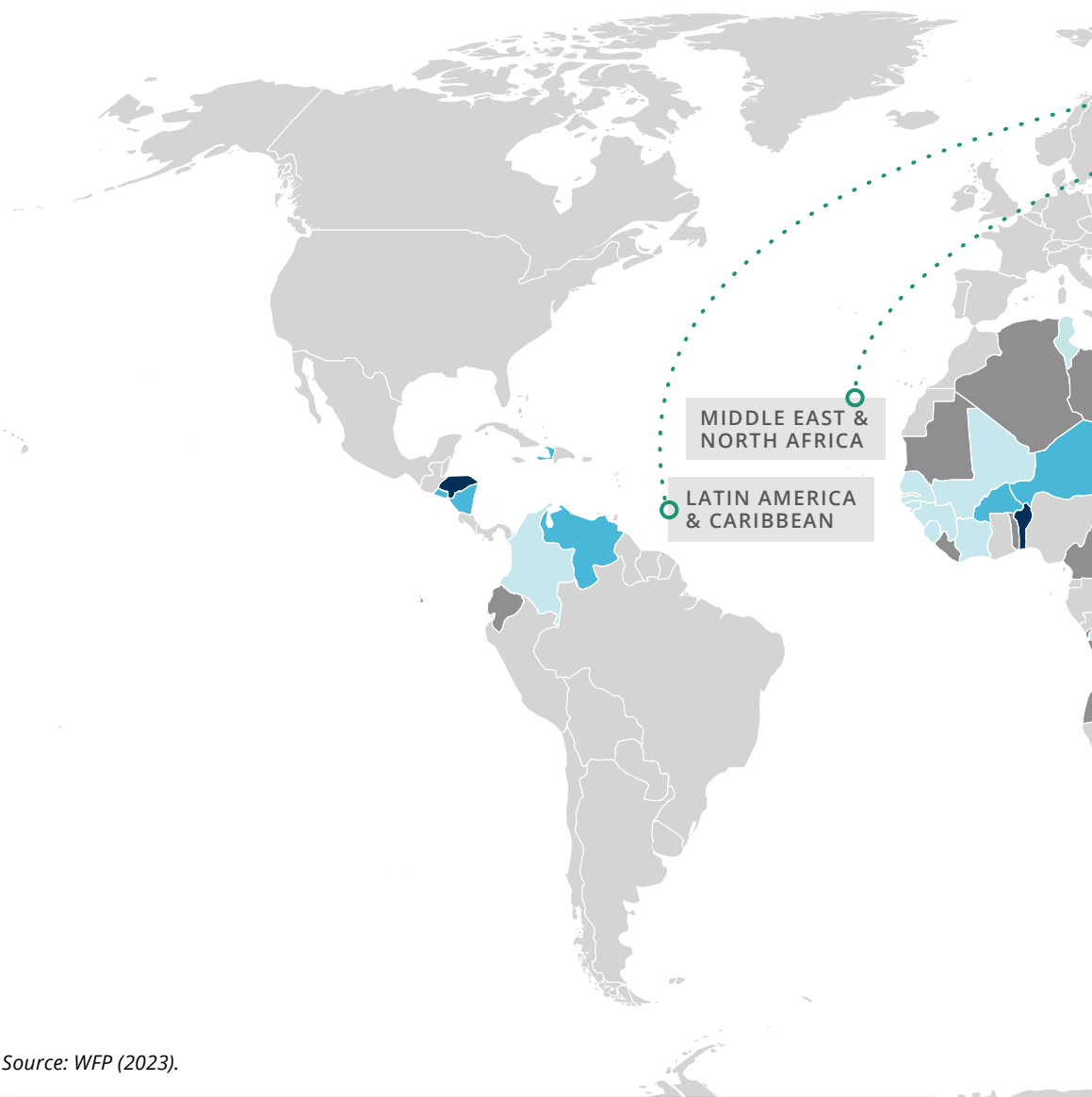
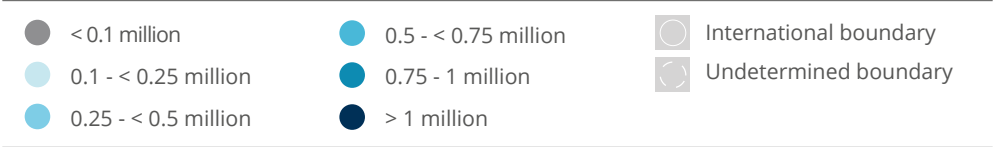
In middle-income countries, WFP prioritizes strengthening national programmes and transitioning to greater national ownership in line with the organization's School Feeding Strategy 2020–2030 and 2024 School Meals Policy. Through technical assistance, WFP has strengthened national capacities, leading to significant increases in national funding and school meals coverage in many countries, e.g. Rwanda and Armenia. WFP has almost halved direct implementation of programmes in middle-income countries since 2013. In countries such as India and Ghana, WFP primarily works through technical assistance to the government. In 2023, WFP's support included establishing strategic partnerships and providing expertise for innovative initiatives to integrate local procurement with links to smallholder farmers, address nutrient gaps and develop local value chains.

A woman from Cambodia helps her daughter with homework.
WFP/Darapech Chea



Map 4.1

Overview of WFP-implemented school meal programmes around the world in 2023⁵



Source: WFP (2023).

⁵ Discrepancy between sum of regional figures and the global figure of 21.4 million is due to rounding.

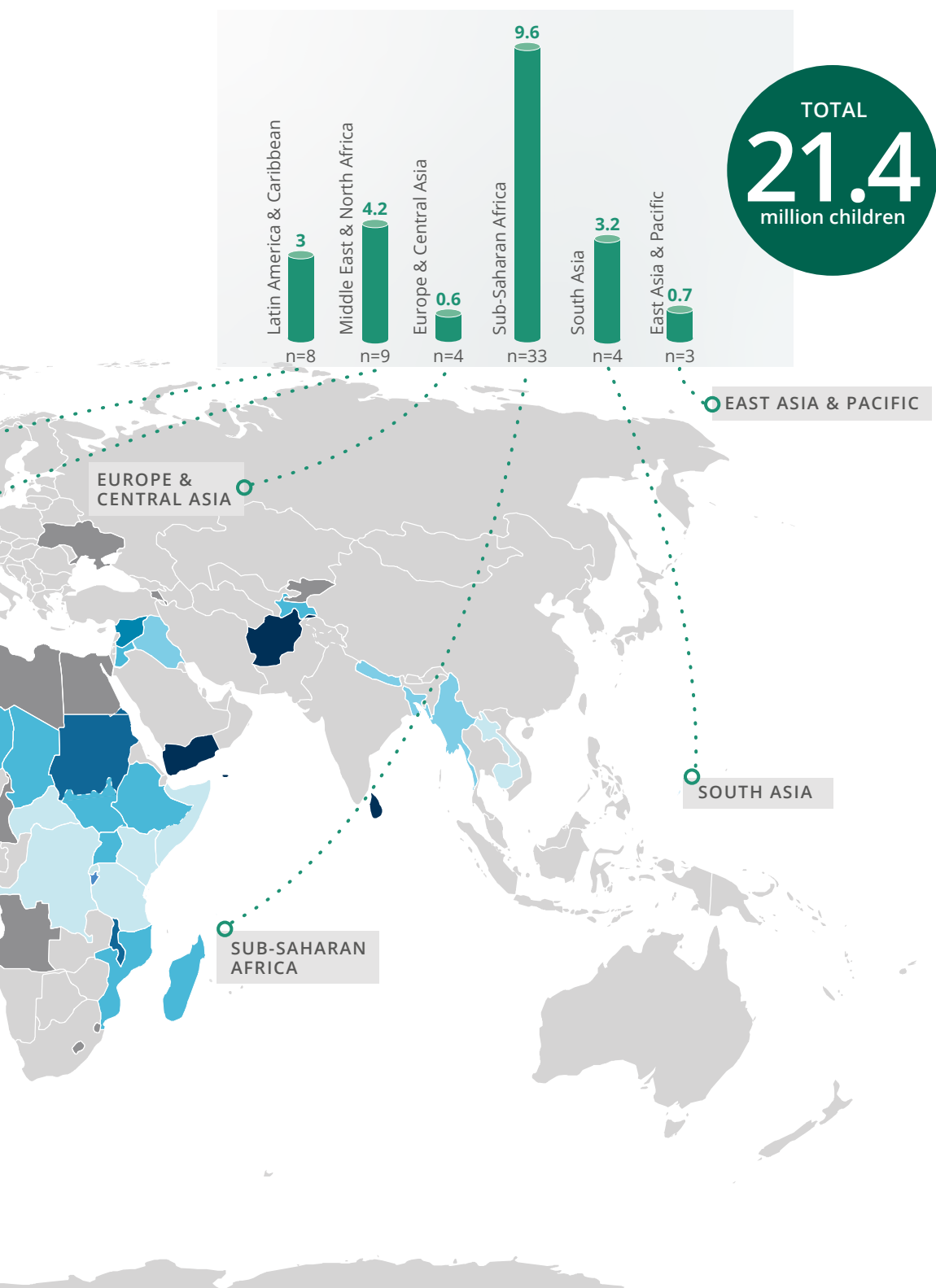
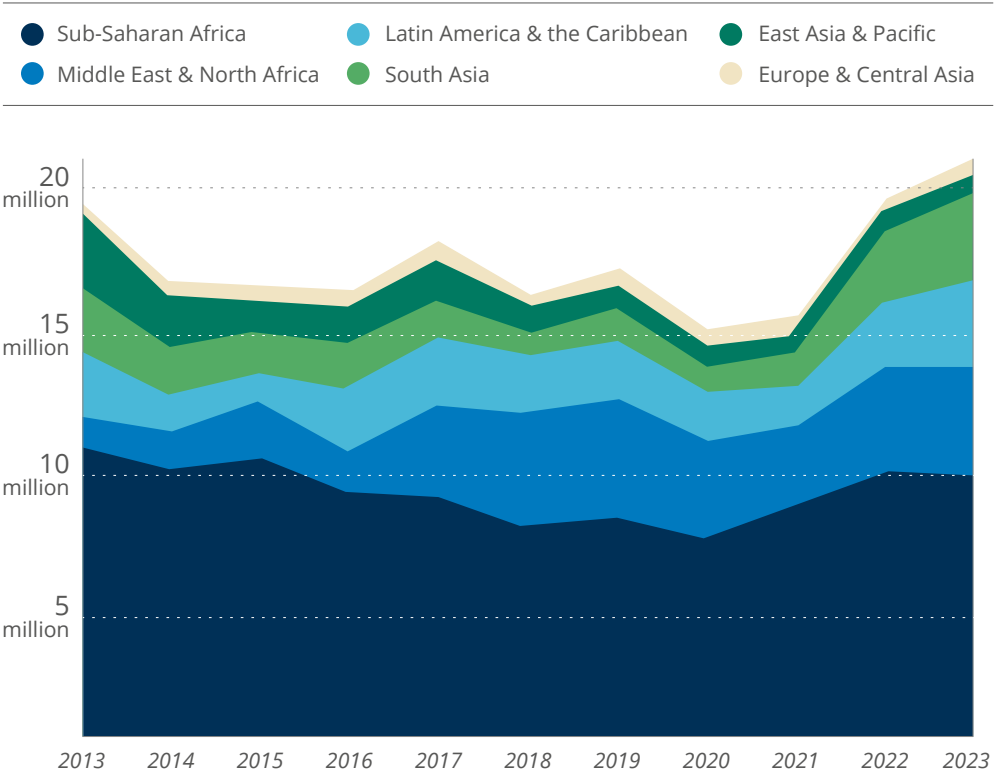


Figure 4.6

Evolution of WFP school meal direct beneficiaries between 2013 and 2023 (by region)

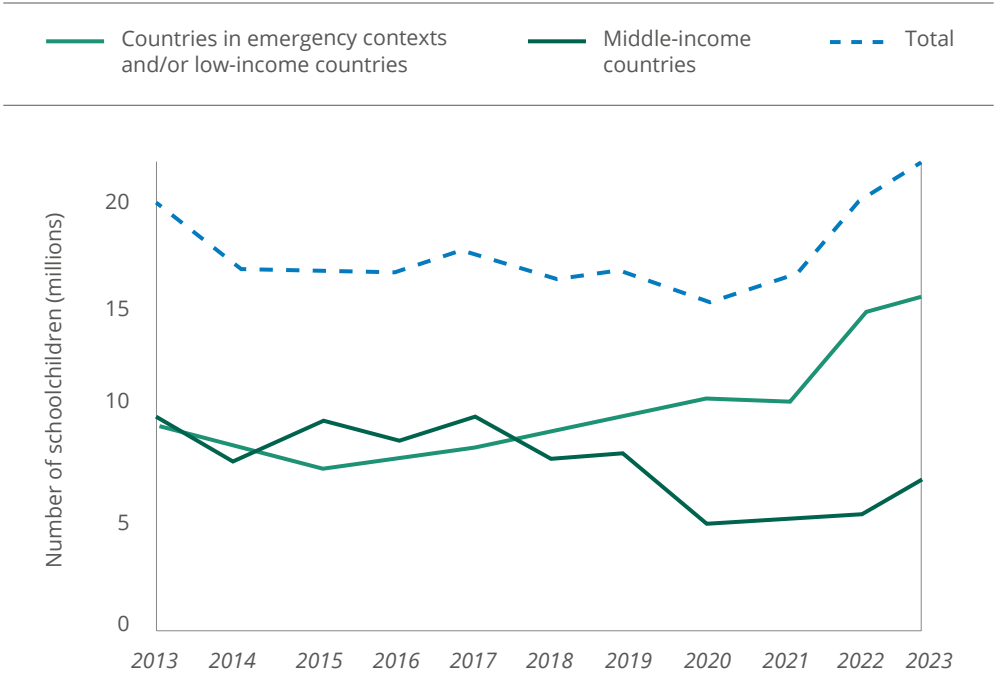
There has been a continuous increase in the number of schoolchildren reached by WFP school meals since 2020. In 2023, this number reached its highest in a decade at 21.4 million children, the largest share of which continues to be in sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: WFP (2013-2023).

Figure 4.7 shows trends in the number of schoolchildren directly reached by WFP school meals between 2013 and 2023, disaggregated by country context. While total reach remained relatively stable until 2021, there was a sharp increase thereafter, rising to over 21 million children by 2023 driven largely by expanded support in emergency and low-income settings. In these contexts, WFP’s reach has grown steadily since 2018, with a notable jump between 2021 and 2022, reflecting the organization’s response to growing needs amid overlapping crises and conflicts. In contrast, the number of children reached directly by WFP in middle-income countries declined sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic and has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. This trend reflects WFP’s strategic shift towards supporting nationally led programmes, as low-income countries transition to middle-income status and as countries strengthen their financial, institutional and technical capacities to manage and sustain school meals independently.

Figure 4.7
 Number of schoolchildren directly reached by WFP school meals over time (2013–2023), by country context



Source: WFP (2013-2023).

Box 4.3

WFP's school meal activities in 2023

WFP provided school meals, snacks and cash-based transfers to 21.4 million children, 48 percent of whom were girls.

Number of schoolchildren receiving assistance by WFP regional bureau:⁶

- Asia and the Pacific: 4.5 million (2.1 million girls)
- Middle East, Northern Africa, Eastern Europe: 4.2 million (1.9 million girls)
- West Africa: 4.3 million (2.1 million girls)
- East Africa: 3.2 million (1.6 million girls)
- Southern Africa: 2.1 million (1.1 girls)
- Latin America and the Caribbean: 3.0 million (1.5 million girls).

In 2023, WFP implemented or supported school meal programmes in 81 countries (4 through direct implementation, 20 with only technical assistance, and 57 with a combination of direct implementation and technical assistance).

WFP supported governments in 59 countries on home-grown school meals, including through programme design, implementation and policy development.

⁶ Discrepancy between sum of regional figures and the global figure of 21.4 million is due to rounding.

4.4 WFP's role in implementing school meals in emergencies

WFP delivers school meals during emergencies, helping children in crisis-affected areas receive essential nutrition support and continued education where possible. A *Synthesis Evaluation on Emergency School Feeding*, published in May 2022,⁷ revealed that school meals improved food security, school attendance and learning outcomes in emergency settings. The synthesis also found that programmes provided a sense of normalcy and stability for children amid the chaos of conflict and displacement. Key findings highlighted the importance of multisectoral collaboration, involving governments, local communities and international partners, to expand the reach of these programmes and make them sustainable. Despite challenges such as funding constraints and logistical hurdles, WFP's emergency school meal programmes have demonstrated substantial benefits, underscoring the need for continued investment and support to maximize their impact.

Governments recognize that their own school meal programmes can help mitigate the impact of disasters for children and their families. The use of school meals in crises, such as during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the more recent global food price crisis, has four main benefits in protecting children and families from shocks:

- **Stable access:** Year-round access to school meals builds the resilience of children and their families, enhancing their long-term capacity to withstand, cope and recover from disasters.
- **Coping mechanism:** When protected and sustained in times of shock, school meal programmes can ensure children have continued access to food even when household resources are strained, or other income sources have collapsed. This can prevent negative coping strategies, such as selling off household resources, and safeguards investments in children's health and education.

⁷ https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000141602/download/?_ga=2.255338123.202682972.1732527057-1715565503.1706110063



A boy in the Democratic Republic of Congo eats a meal in school. WFP/Vincent Tremeau

- **Adaptation:** School meals can be adapted during shocks to accommodate new vulnerabilities beyond their regular scope. Existing school meal programmes can be used as an entry point to provide essential food assistance to family members and others in the community. Adaptations might include altering delivery methods, such as adding take-home rations or community distribution points.
- **Social protection:** Evidence of the benefits of school meal programmes in disasters can be a powerful incentive for governments to incorporate them as a regular social protection instrument. In countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, school meal programmes that initially launched as emergency responses later expanded, continuing beyond the initial shock and becoming an integral part of national social protection frameworks.

Examples of WFP programmes in emergency contexts include in the Middle East and in North Africa, where despite significant obstacles – such as supply chain disruptions, school infrastructure damage, water shortages, safety risks and limited access – WFP has developed resilient, context-specific school meal programmes often integrated into national safety nets and delivered in partnership with governments, UN agencies, international financial institutions, communities and NGOs. In Yemen, for example, WFP supported 1.5 million children with fortified snacks and launched Healthy Kitchens to provide home-grown school meals to 34,800 children in 2024, working closely with the Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank, UNICEF, Save the Children and other Education Cluster partners. In Syria, over 911,100 children benefited from date bars, fresh meals and cash-based transfers, with school attendance rising to 88 percent. WFP partnered with UNICEF and local NGOs to implement and scale these efforts, including additional support in response to the earthquake and the crisis in Lebanon. In Lebanon, WFP's school meals initiative – supporting 107,000 children, including many Syrian refugees – adapted to conflict disruptions in 2024 by shifting to take-home snacks during remote learning periods. WFP resumed in-school meals following a November 2024 ceasefire, and partnered with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, local NGOs and the French Development Agency, among others. In Gaza, WFP distributed snacks to 117,886 children in UN temporary learning spaces in 2024, with plans to expand operations as access and security conditions permit.

In Sudan (where WFP has implemented school meal programmes since 1969) nearly 25 million people face acute food insecurity, with famine confirmed in several regions and malnutrition rates among children dangerously high. WFP resumed its home-grown school meals initiative in March 2024 using take-home rations in five states, including the Red Sea, where it reached 42,685 students. This approach not only addressed food insecurity but also improved school attendance, especially among girls.

WFP has scaled its operations to support over 565,000 students and staff, procuring 9,000 metric tons of cereals from six farmer organizations, demonstrating the resilience and impact of integrating education, agriculture and community engagement during crises.

To capitalize on the advantages of providing school meals in emergencies, governments must make social protection systems more “shock-responsive”. Based on lessons learned from past global efforts, programmes may need to be redesigned to allow for flexible expansion; changing delivery methods; securing contingency funding; developing more innovative partnerships; or developing protocols that enable changes to be triggered in the event of a disaster. In many countries, WFP provides technical assistance to support such policy changes.

School meals in Ukraine offer children stability and continued education. WFP/Anastasiia Honcharuk



4.5 Empowering women and girls through school meals

School meal programmes intervene at multiple levels – individual, household, community, school and national level. They represent a unique opportunity to address the different challenges that boys and girls and children with disabilities face, which prevent them from reaching their full potential. School meals can increase the agency of women and girls and children with disabilities by challenging unequal power relations and discriminatory norms and laws.

From 2022 to 2024, WFP made significant strides to ensure that both girls and boys benefit equally from school meal initiatives. These efforts include targeting the barriers girls face to attend school and continue their education as they get older, as well as interventions to empower women in local food supply chains through the purchase and preparation of school meals. WFP has increasingly used research and evidence to bring the benefits of school meals to all boys and girls, including children with disabilities.

For instance, in Rwanda, WFP conducted an assessment to better understand the nuanced context within which the home-grown school meal programme operates – especially how it may affect boys, girls, men and women differently. The assessment yielded insights on the inequalities within the programme’s communities and stakeholders, identified root causes and recommended improvements to programme design. The study demonstrated the importance of analysing how boys, girls, men and women from different groups may be impacted differently by the provision of school meals.

In Mozambique, WFP implements the Combating Absenteeism and Reducing Barriers to Education programme, which delivers locally procured healthy meals and promotes access to education, particularly for girls. The programme focuses on three components:

1. The provision of training to school and community-level actors, with the aim of changing adolescent students' beliefs and behaviours that may be harmful or unfair to girls and boys.
2. The creation and consolidation of "dialogue clubs" to promote conversations between girls and boys around fair treatment. Dialogue clubs aim to create a safe environment for girls and boys where they can learn more about inequalities and how to address them.
3. The distribution of menstrual hygiene management kits to increase girls' comfort and confidence in their daily activities, reducing barriers to school attendance, and to help girls stay in school throughout their adolescence.

The Combating Absenteeism and Reducing Barriers to Education programme highlights how one intervention can combine components that complement and reinforce each other. It also demonstrates how building the capacity of school and community actors is key to changing social norms and attitudes towards equality.

In Malawi, the evaluation of the first phase of the Joint Programme for Girls Education highlighted the importance of bringing men and boys into discussions on girls' rights, not just as observers but as actors with equal responsibility to advance equality and social inclusion. It also emphasized the importance of including boys in project activities that provide visible benefits, such as scholarships, and the need to raise parents' awareness of the importance of their daughters' education.

These examples illustrate that programmes can integrate measures at different stages to address inequality at multiple levels, meeting the most immediate and practical needs of girls, boys, women and men while also triggering changes in agency, social relations and social structures.

Box 4.4

Lessons learned from the Breaking Barriers for Girls' Education project – a multisectoral approach to girls' education in fragile contexts

In Chad and Niger, girls residing in conflict areas face significant barriers to education. These include poverty, food insecurity, early marriage, gender-based violence as well as poor health and nutrition services. Cultural norms and safety concerns further exacerbate the situation. Conflicts in Niger, for instance, led to the closure of 900 schools, which forced girls in many areas to walk long distances across dangerous terrain to attend school, increasing their exposure to violence. In Chad, the presence of Boko Haram in some areas heightened the risks for girls and discouraged their attendance. In response to these challenges, in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA, WFP implemented the Breaking Barriers for Girls' Education project in vulnerable areas of Chad and Niger from 2019 to 2022. This initiative, funded by Global Affairs Canada, used a multisectoral approach to address key barriers to girls' education, combining school meals, cash incentives, and health and hygiene support. WFP, a lead partner in the initiative, played a central role in improving educational outcomes for girls through targeted school meal programmes. Project evaluations in both countries reinforced the important role of school meals in improving girls' access to education, particularly in fragile settings. Both evaluations showed that school meals and cash incentives were effective in increasing enrolment and attendance rates.

In Niger, the percentage of girls taking final primary school exams rose from 20 percent to 36 percent, largely driven by school meals and cash incentives, which reduced the economic burdens on families and encouraged parents to prioritize education. In Chad, the evaluation found evidence of increased educational aspirations among students and families alike. The collaboration between WFP and its partners helped keep girls in school while providing them with safe and supportive spaces, demonstrating the value of the project's multisectoral approach. Expanding these interventions to reach more out-of-school girls, especially in areas where insecurity limits access to education, will be critical to grow and sustain the progress achieved.

Box 4.5**Empowering girls and boys through school meal programmes in Asia and the Pacific**

WFP's Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, in partnership with Development Pathways, conducted a two-year operational research study to learn how school-based programmes could be used as a platform to address the causes and consequences of inequalities between boys and girls. The study informed operational guidance on how WFP and its partners can work across various dimensions to help boys and girls access the same opportunities. Recommendations included building individual and collective agency and empowerment; challenging unequal power relations; and making formal and informal social norms and structures more equitable. The study identified the following good practices in the region:

- In Nepal, WFP and its partners worked with the government to develop educational materials and train teachers to address social norms around menstrual hygiene management with their students.
- In Sri Lanka, WFP collaborated with the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment to address unequal power relations and promote women's leadership and economic empowerment. WFP and the ministry trained Women Development Officers who, in turn, strengthened the financial literacy and economic independence of the school meal providers and women-led cooperatives involved in the home-grown school meal programme.
- In Cambodia, making formal and informal social norms and structures more equitable is an important objective for WFP and the government. WFP engaged with the Ministry of Women's Affairs to advocate for formalizing the contracts of cooks who prepare school meals and empowering women as programme suppliers.

The study also identified that social and behaviour change activities, which currently focus on health and nutrition, can be expanded to influence norms and attitudes about women and men in the wider community. The potential to advance women's economic and social empowerment through home-grown school meals emerged clearly in the study. Programmes can provide training to enhance women's skills and leadership capacities and provide access to income-generating opportunities and agricultural services, building the individual and collective agency of women producers and suppliers. Recognizing cooks and other actors engaged in the provision of meals as formal workers and providing them with proper wages is crucial to treat women and men fairly.

Achieving the full potential of gender-transformative approaches in school meal programmes demands coordinated, systematic and concerted efforts. By collating good practices and analysing enabling factors, lessons and challenges, WFP is contributing to the evidence base for advancing equality and women's empowerment through school meal programmes.

A student from Lao PDR enjoys her hot meal in school.
WFP/Vilakhone Sipaseuth



4.6 WFP's innovation in school meals

WFP has consistently integrated technology to enhance its school meal operations, aligning with the UN's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. WFP's School Feeding Strategy 2020–2030 and the new 2024 School Meals Policy emphasize data and digital innovation as key components of effective programmes. Since 2019, WFP has developed two innovative tools: School Connect and School Menu Planner PLUS, to improve efficiency, effectiveness and cost management in school meal programmes.

School Connect

Launched in 2020, School Connect digitizes school registries and extracts key performance indicators for school meal programmes – replacing paper-based data collection, review and recording, which can be cumbersome and error-prone. This application allows schools to efficiently manage stocks, attendance, enrolment and consumption information digitally. It supports various meal modalities, including on-site meals, school purchases, cash-to-schools and take-home rations, and incorporates home-grown school meal components. Access to these indicators in near real time enables programme staff to invest more time in providing quality support to schools, while ensuring that school meal programmes can adapt based on the most up-to-date and accurate data possible. School Connect aids programmes at different stages of transition to national ownership in 20 countries across the African continent, as well as Haiti, Honduras, Lebanon and Ukraine.

West and Central Africa is leading the adoption of this innovation: School Connect provides real-time data for regional programmatic oversight in 54 percent of schools where WFP works. In Benin, the tool tracks meals for 1.2 million children within the National Integrated School Meal Programme and has been used by the government as a blueprint for the design of its national monitoring system. In Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, machine learning analysis of School Connect data informs school meal programme design by identifying factors driving attendance and dropouts. In Haiti, the tool reduces response times and provides near real-time data on food movements for over 200,000 children covered by the home-grown school meal programme.

School Menu Planner (SMP) PLUS

SMP PLUS enables school meal operators to efficiently develop nutritious, affordable and community-sensitive school meal programmes.

This AI-powered, web-based application optimizes school meal menus, ensuring they are cost-effective, use locally available foods and are nutritionally balanced. It also enhances economic opportunities for smallholder farmers and supports government efforts worldwide.

To date, 46 countries have been trained to use SMP PLUS, with 29 actively using the application to create menus. Over 4 million children benefit from meals designed through the platform. Benefits of SMP PLUS include enhancing diet diversity, advocating for increased school meal budgets, designing cookbooks and improving coordination among sectors involved in school meal programmes. For example, in Madagascar, a new menu using local foods now covers 40 percent of children's macro nutrient needs and 30 percent of their micro-nutrient needs. In Lesotho, the tool calculated prices for food baskets and menu options, which helped stakeholders advocate for an increased budget. Eventually, the government increased funding for the National School Feeding Programme by 65 percent.

In Zambia, SMP PLUS has been instrumental in operationalizing the Home-Grown School Feeding Procurement Strategy and the Diet Diversification Plan by creating district-level menus that meet children's nutritional needs using costed, local ingredients.

4.7 Way forward

Looking ahead, WFP is poised to deepen its role in advancing nationally owned, sustainable school meal programmes as a key driver of development in the twenty-first century. With school meals recognized as a powerful tool for tackling poverty, enhancing education and transforming food systems, WFP will focus on supporting governments through strengthened partnerships, targeted technical assistance and global policy leadership. The expansion of the School Meals Coalition reflects growing political momentum and commitment to scaling up school meal programmes. WFP will leverage this momentum – working with governments, international agencies, civil society and the private sector – to support countries in designing resilient, inclusive and context-specific school meal programmes that are rooted in collaboration and shared responsibility.

As outlined in its 2024 School Meals Policy, WFP will prioritize three strategic shifts to guide its future efforts.

- First, it will reinforce its role as a convener and advocate, facilitating stronger multisector partnerships across education, health, agriculture and social protection to align school meal programmes with broader development goals.
- Second, WFP will deepen its collaboration with governments and partners to build and finance robust national systems, grounded in evidence and tailored to local priorities.
- Third, it will work to enhance programme quality, ensuring school meals are integrated with nutrition, climate action and food system transformation. Partnerships will be central to each of these shifts, bringing together actors at every level to share expertise, align resources and scale solutions.

WFP’s way forward also involves scaling its operational agility in fragile and humanitarian contexts while embedding long-term resilience through policy engagement and capacity strengthening. WFP will continue to work with partners to support national efforts to make school meal programmes more socially inclusive and adaptable to shocks, ensuring they serve as effective safety nets during crises. By fostering a dynamic ecosystem of collaboration across governments, donors, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector, WFP aims to drive lasting impact. This approach will help institutionalize school meals as a core element of human capital development, unlocking opportunities for millions of children and contributing to more equitable and sustainable national growth.



Farmers harvest potatoes for school meals in Venezuela.
WFP/Gustavo Vera