



# Middle East and North Africa Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection:

A partnership for enhanced nutrition, education and resilience



**World Food Programme**





**The Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region aims at enhancing the effectiveness and broadening the coverage and impact of school meals programmes<sup>1</sup> as a key social protection instrument in support of poor and vulnerable children and marginalized communities. It embraces both crisis situations as well as more stable but vulnerable contexts, strengthening resilience and providing opportunities for more inclusive development pathways and social stability.**

The joint initiative brings together leading governments and national institutions, as well as regional organizations, UN agencies and other international organizations, specialized bodies, donors, and the private sector, leveraging their complementary capacities and expertise.

The key objective is to ensure that the most vulnerable girls and boys are reached with quality and high-impact school meals programmes responsive to local needs and linked to nutrition, education, health and social protection. By supporting national governments and institutions to enhance the quality and sustainability of national programmes, and by linking such programmes to local economies and agriculture, the initiative contributes to accelerating progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Agenda 2030, including:

2 ZERO HUNGER



1 NO POVERTY



4 QUALITY EDUCATION



5 GENDER EQUALITY



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



In the MENA region, school meals programmes provide a concrete platform for partners' strategic and programmatic convergence around the shared objective of delivering mutually reinforcing social protection, nutrition and education outcomes, while contributing to poverty reduction, community resilience and social cohesion.

School meals programmes complement other social protection interventions and contribute to the development of national social protection floors.

<sup>1</sup>**School meals programmes and services** include the provision of hot meals or snacks in schools, take-home food rations, or the provision of food vouchers and cash transfers to households conditional on school enrolment and attendance, as well as policy advice and technical capacity development activities and services.



The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region presents some of the most challenging development and humanitarian settings in the world. MENA is the only region in the world where the rates of malnutrition have been on the rise over the past decade,<sup>i</sup> while overweight and obesity are increasing simultaneously. It is also the region with the highest youth unemployment rates. One of the most intractable social challenges remains gender discrimination. Deepening poverty and inequality is resulting from a combination of factors including demographic trends, ineffective development pathways, weak agricultural systems, economic shocks and natural disasters, as well as unprecedented conflict-induced humanitarian crises causing the largest displacement and refugee crisis since World War II.

Children and adolescents are particularly affected and in many cases have had their education disrupted. One in every four children and young adolescents (i.e. almost 23 million) in the region are either out of school or at risk of dropping out.<sup>ii</sup>

Nearly 90 percent of out-of-school children in the region are in crisis-affected countries. Girls, and particularly poor adolescent girls, are more likely to be excluded from education.

Growing demands for social protection combined with a shrinking fiscal space are compromising governments' capacity to sustain national social protection and safety nets systems, which in many cases are fragmented and fail to reach the poorest.

In light of this situation, several governments have embarked in an effort to reform their national social protection programmes. These are increasingly linked to education and health promotion.

**Strengthened, well-targeted school meals programmes and services, embedded in national education and social protection systems, are a critical part of the efforts to advance more effective, inclusive and comprehensive social policies, as they provide a platform for achieving multiple benefits in both stable as well as complex environments.**

<sup>i</sup> S. Devereux, 2015: *Social Protection and Safety Nets in the Middle East and North Africa*. IDS Research Report 80, IDS and WFP, Brighton, UK.

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF: *All In School/The Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children*.



## The Mena Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection

School meals programmes are widely implemented in MENA countries. Governments recognize the role that school meals programmes can play as part of broader social protection policies while addressing gender inequalities and promoting development.

School meals programmes are increasingly being leveraged as interventions that contribute to a number of human development outcomes, critical in supporting the longer-term resilience of vulnerable households to seasonal, economic and climate-related shocks, including child nutrition and health, education, and gender and equity. By linking school meals with local agricultural markets in the form of home-grown school meals programmes, the benefits can be multiplied. Local procurement from smallholder farmers allows vulnerable farmers to access school meals markets while supporting healthier diets and programmes' sustainability. Finally, home-grown school meals contribute towards the resilience of local agricultural communities, fostering local development and food security.

Countries like Egypt and Jordan are leading efforts to prioritize the enhancement and expansion of school meals as an essential shock-responsive safety net that can yield multiple benefits. In other countries, like Morocco and Tunisia, the provision of nutritious school meals is a key component of ongoing education sector reforms, supporting a long-term approach to ensure inclusion and stability.

School meals programmes have also proved their value in the most challenging and complex environments of all: in the aftermath of emergencies and during protracted crises. There is robust evidence that school meals are relatively easy to scale up during a crisis and can provide a significant in-kind benefit to households. In Lebanon, school meals contribute to the country's comprehensive strategy for scaling-up equitable access to education for Syrian refugee and underprivileged Lebanese children (RACE II). By doing so, they have been instrumental in protecting the educational futures of some of the most vulnerable children in the world, and provide the bridge between humanitarian interventions and development.

## A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH FOR SCHOOL MEALS



**Promoting community participation**

**Supporting school health and sanitation**

**Providing a safety net to households**

**Linking with local agricultural production and local markets**

**Designing nutritious & balanced school meals**

**Promoting healthy diets through nutrition education and school gardens**

**Strengthening national governance, systems and policies**

**Creating income generating opportunities for women**

Building on experience and evidence accumulated to date, WFP convened a multi-stakeholder meeting in mid-2016 to discuss lessons and opportunities to enhance the efficiency and impact of school meals programmes through increased strategic and operational convergence and enhanced collaboration among partners.

The Consultation resulted in a shared vision for a MENA Regional Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection, which will leverage complementary capacities and expertise from different sectors to enhance school meals coverage, quality and impact, and better embed them in wider social protection policies.

The initiative, which will be presented at the Executive Board Meeting of the World Food Programme in Rome in February 2017, brings together governments and other stakeholders, to:

»» **Deliver mutually reinforcing benefits** through bold strategic partnerships, enhanced collaboration, and gender-sensitive multi-sectorial approaches at the country and regional levels;

- »» **Enhance school meal programmes' coverage**, by promoting a systemic, needs-based and coordinated scale-up approach to effectively target and reach the most vulnerable;
- »» **Improve programme quality and efficiency**, by promoting common minimum standards for the region;
- »» **Strengthen governance systems and policies**, support the transition from emergency to developmental programmes, and reinforce linkages to national safety nets and social protection, to progressively build national social protection floors;
- »» **Foster capacity and knowledge**, building on evidence-based models and country leadership, through the sharing of best practices, including South-South cooperation.

In the spirit of Agenda 2030, a multi-dimensional approach to school meals and strong cooperation among governments and partners offer a unique opportunity to enable equitable learning and social protection of girls and boys, and maximize the chances of every child to thrive and communities to prosper in the region.

## SCHOOL MEALS BENEFITS

**Well-designed and targeted school meals programmes and services have proven to be a powerful instrument of social protection.**<sup>iii</sup> They provide a safety net to assist low-income and vulnerable families with children, contributing to hunger reduction, income security and social inclusion.

In the long term, they support child development through improved access to education and learning, and enhanced nutrition. Providing nutritious school meals with complementary nutrition, education and health measures can boost nutrition, health and school performance, especially among the most disadvantaged children.

School meals may support the enrolment and attendance, improved attention spans, and enhanced performance of boys and girls. There is ample evidence that school meals can improve schoolchildren's nutrition and address micronutrient deficiencies, particularly anaemia and Vitamin A. Furthermore, healthy school meals in conjunction with nutrition education and school gardens promote healthy eating behaviours that can last beyond the classroom. Adequately nourished children will learn and thrive. Evidence from a number of studies clearly demonstrates that school meals help boost performance and cognitive ability when properly aligned with education programmes, including in high-income countries. For instance, five studies from low-income countries consistently found significant improvements in math performance.<sup>iv</sup> A Danish pilot project found that children receiving healthy school meals showed higher language proficiency than their peers who brought packed lunches from home.<sup>v</sup> School meals may also encourage school enrolment for girls at critical nutritional stages. Studies across 32 African countries showed that the number of girls enrolled increased by 28 percent during the year after meals were made available. Furthermore, local food purchases, especially from small-scale farmers, supports rural livelihoods and promotes sustainable local markets, contributing to food security.

In times of crisis and distress, school meals contribute to providing essential safety nets to affected children and their families, helping prevent malnutrition and encouraging school attendance. Evidence also shows that school meals help bringing out-of-school children back to the classroom, restoring a sense of normalcy. In turn, they may help tackle the economic constraints that cause child labour and early marriage, and foster social inclusion and resilience.

By providing the poorest children with the catalyst to attend school, the programmes, when aligned properly, open up an access channel for a range of other professionals. In many instances, school meals serve as a means of spreading greater knowledge about health, hygiene and nutrition.

A holistic approach to school meals and education can unleash a chain of beneficial impacts: better child nutrition supports better education, which not only increases future earning potentials, but also promotes healthier lives and improved health choices by mothers, which in turn leads to enhanced education and nutrition for the next generation. Child mortality diminished drastically around the world in the period 1970-2009 and half of the saved lives can be attributed to the increased education of women.<sup>vi</sup> Economic modelling by WFP shows that every US\$1 invested in school meals brings a US\$3-10 economic return from improved health, education and productivity, depending on context.

The benefits of school meals will depend on the context and on the programme design. To reach their full potential, school meals need to be adapted to the local context and respond to an adequate assessment of needs. They also need to involve different sectors and link to the other programmes that support vulnerable families and children. As part of the wider education system, they should be provided alongside other interventions that contribute to children's learning and health.

<sup>iii</sup> Bundy, D. et al. (2009): *Rethinking School feeding. Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector. The World Bank. Washington. Recent overviews of the evidence on school feeding benefits can be found in WFP (2017): "How School Meals Contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals - A Collection of Evidence". [www.wfp.org/school-meals](http://www.wfp.org/school-meals). Healthy Meals in Schools: Policy Innovations Linking Agriculture, Food Systems and Nutrition. Policy Brief. London, UK: Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition.*

<sup>iv</sup> Kristjansson E.A. et al. (2007). *School feeding for improving the physical and psychosocial health of disadvantaged students. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2007;1.*

<sup>v</sup> Sorensen et al. (2015). *The effects of Nordic school meals on concentration and school performance in 8- to 11-year old children in the OPUS School Meal Study. British Journal of Nutrition 113:1280-91. [link]*

<sup>vi</sup> E. Gakidou et al. (2010). *Increased educational attainment and its effect on child mortality in 175 countries between 1970 and 2009: a systematic analysis, The Lancet 376 (9745): 959-74. Link.*

## Regional Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection in



In **Morocco** and **Tunisia**, the renewed national school meals programmes are a critical component of the education sector reform. In Tunisia, partnerships bring together the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and communities. New modalities are being developed to foster links with smallholder farmers and support local development, especially through rural women's cooperatives supported by FAO. In Morocco, WFP provides technical support to the Government to ensure schoolchildren receive nutritious and healthy meals.

In **Egypt**, the Government is engaged in the reform of its social protection system with support from partners such as the World Bank and ILO. The country has prioritised school meals. ILO, UNICEF and WFP have collaborated since 2006 to prevent child labour and promote access to education in remote and vulnerable areas. WFP provides school meals to all community schools supported by UNICEF, and additional take-home rations for girls and boys who attend regularly. Training is provided by local NGOs

to more than 50,000 poor households, especially those headed by women, to design and manage income-generating activities in a bid to reduce reliance on child labour.

In **Sudan**, the Ministry of Education is developing a National School Feeding Policy with a wide range of stakeholders including line ministries, UN agencies, the World Bank and community-based organizations. The programme currently serves school meals to almost one million children, more than half of whom come from displaced and other vulnerable families in the Darfur region. In Darfur, school meals are part of quality basic services provided to internally displaced people (IDPs) under the umbrella of the Darfur Protracted Displacement Strategy.

In Kassala, the programme has been designed specifically to tackle the social barriers preventing girls and boys from attending school. Take-home rations for girls support food consumption and promote girls' access to education in the localities with alarming gender disparities. Synergies with UNICEF's School Improvement Plan will be further strengthened to build healthy learning environments.



## MENA. Examples of Programmes and partnerships under way:



In **Lebanon**, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) committed to scaling-up equitable access to formal education for all Syrian refugee and underprivileged Lebanese children. WFP, in partnership with MEHE, supports Lebanese and Syrian refugee children's enrolment and attendance by providing healthy school snacks and complementary nutrition awareness sessions.

WFP and UNICEF are also implementing a pilot programme that offers 50,000 refugee children enrolled in second shift public schools a monthly cash grant throughout the academic year. Funding provided by UNICEF contributes to the indirect costs of education, as well as the opportunity cost of families sending their older children to school. WFP funding contributes to the costs of purchasing school meals. Families receive the cash grants through the UN common card, used for other cash transfers. Cash can be withdrawn from any ATM within Lebanon.

In **Jordan**, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and WFP provide snacks to over 350,000 students in poor areas. The Healthy Kitchen Project links school meals with social

protection, nutrition awareness and women's empowerment. The project was developed under the partnership between the MoE and WFP and is managed by the Royal Health Awareness Society, a national NGO. Healthy school meals include fresh vegetables and fruits, and are prepared in kitchens operated by charity-based organizations, creating jobs for vulnerable women and men. In partnership with UN Women, they have been expanded to formal schools in refugee camps. WFP and UNICEF are planning a further expansion to reach double shift schools.

In **Syria**, UNICEF and WFP are collaborating to secure education opportunities to conflict-affected children. 485,000 students receive nutritious snacks. Out-of-school children enrolling in alternative learning spaces also receive food vouchers as an incentive. UNESCO also supports more than 30,000 children and youth to join an accelerated learning programme.

School meals programmes also support refugee and displaced children, particularly girls, in **Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon and Sudan**.

**A network of leading institutions involved in school health and nutrition, social protection, education and food security are embracing the Regional Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection in MENA**, providing a solid basis for implementation and further scaling up to reach the most vulnerable and affected children and adolescents:

## UNITED NATIONS ACTORS



**WFP** provides school meals to more than 17 million schoolchildren worldwide, of whom 6.4 million live in emergency and recovery contexts. It provides technical assistance and policy advice to national governments to strengthen national programmes as social protection interventions, and to link school meals to local agricultural production. In the MENA region, WFP is supporting school meals activities in 11 countries, reaching 2.5 million schoolchildren as direct beneficiaries, and many more indirectly through the support provided to families and technical assistance.



**FAO**, as the leading agency for food and nutrition security policies and school-based nutrition education and school gardens, is in a strategic position to support the bridging between nutrition -sensitive school meals and local food production. By supporting cooperatives around the MENA region, FAO helps the enhancement of rural livelihoods and directly contributes to higher levels of food and nutrition security.



**ILO** supports policy dialogue and policy reform to scale up social protection and protect all vulnerable people. Key to this is the development of national social protection floors and the eradication of child labour. Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security. School meals as part of national social protection floors can contribute to poverty reduction of families with children.



**UNESCO** promotes education as a fundamental human right, facilitates policy dialogue, knowledge, and capacity building, and works to improve the quality of education. In MENA, it has a strong focus on vulnerable children and adolescents' access to education, especially for displaced and refugee children, both through formal and non-formal education.



**UN ESCWA** provides regional fora for discussion and exchange and facilitates common initiatives across Arab countries on social inclusion, social protection and inclusive urban development.



**The World Bank** supports national social protection systems' reform through evidence-based policy dialogue and financing capacity, providing a unique opportunity to integrate school meals as part of comprehensive and shock-responsive social protection systems. It also provides technical assistance to improve programme design and sustainability.

## REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS



**The League of Arab States** is a unique forum for policy dialogue and cooperation between member countries. It provides a platform to build political commitment and promote member countries' financial support for more inclusive and efficient social protection, including school meal programmes. In this regard, its Arab Ministerial Council of Social Affairs, through the resolution no.828 of December 15th 2016, welcomed cooperation with WFP and assigned its technical Secretariat to undertake joint programmes related to the implementation of Agenda 2030. Based on this Resolution, an Action Plan will be developed to implement activities related to the MENA Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection.

## OTHER KEY PARTNERS



**The Education Commission** brings together the best research and policy analysis to identify the most effective and accountable ways of mobilizing and deploying resources to help ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to learn and gain the skills they need for adulthood and work in the 21st century.

**Non-governmental organizations** bring important expertise and local knowledge stemming from their work with the communities. They provide key complementary activities and play a critical role in engaging the communities. NGOs have also a strong voice to raise awareness on children's and local needs.



**PCD** conducts research and provides technical assistance to deliver effective and sustainable school health and nutrition programmes. Other research institutes are instrumental in building the evidence base for school meals and social protection, and have accompanied consultations on the Initiative.



**Private sector** engagement has been crucial to raise awareness on children's needs and to mobilize additional financial and technical resources to upgrade school infrastructure and equipment, develop education materials, and build expertise on supply chain management and food safety. Private businesses also produce healthy school snacks and meals.

**Consultations are under way with a number of other key partners to further broaden this collaborative effort, including IFPRI, the Global Education Cluster, UNICEF and UNHCR among others.**

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The Initiative for School Meals and Social Protection in the Middle East and North Africa region is supported by an increasing number of actors, including:



Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



International Labour Organization



United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Beirut Office



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