



World Vision 

ENOUGH

School Meals Overview

**Nourishing and
transformational:
the power of
universal,
inclusive, and
sustainable
school meals**

September 2024



“In some places, some children die from hunger. When there is war, the situation is worse as no one has food, and their health deteriorates to the extreme. We should work together on ending hunger to ensure children’s survival.”

Ignace, 14, Maliⁱ



Key messages

- School meal programmes play a crucial role in encouraging even the most disadvantaged families, especially girls, to send their children to school
- Expanding school meal programmes stabilises household incomes, empowers local communities, and supports regenerative agricultural practices.
- Equitable and inclusive school meals enhance educational outcomes, support health, and nutrition for the most vulnerable children.
- Sustainable school meals have immense potential to address climate change and environmental issues, and to support the local economy by incorporating food purchased from small local farmers.

Background

Hunger and malnutrition pose continuous threats to the lives of vulnerable populations, impacting the well-being of millions of children, and billions of women and adolescents worldwide. The problem is particularly acute in least-developed countries, with countries in Asia and Africa, as well as conflict-affected nations, facing heightened vulnerabilities.

The global challenge of malnutrition is profound:

- In 2023, 733 million people were affected by hunger;ⁱⁱ
- 148.1 million children suffered stunted growth, with 75% of these children residing in conflict-affected countries;
- 45 million (6.8%) of the world’s children experienced wasting; and,
- 37 million (5.6%) grappled with issues relating to excessive weight.ⁱⁱⁱ

Meanwhile, adolescents remain vulnerable to undernutrition due to their relatively high nutritional needs. Lack of healthy and nutritious meals can have a devastating impact on their growth and development.^{iv}

In all regions affected by growing global food insecurity and hunger, an increasing number of children, especially girls, are put at risk of child marriage, child labour, and sexual violence.^v

ⁱ <https://www.wvi.org/ENOUGH/take-action>

ⁱⁱ [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024 \(fao.org\)](https://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition-2024)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/the-state-of-food-security-and-nutrition-in-the-world-2023>

^{iv} <https://www.dcp-3.org/resources/child-and-adolescent-health-and-development-optimizing-education-outcomes>

^v <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/it-takes-world/end-child-marriage/breaking-chain-empowering-girls-and-communities-end-child>

More than 3.3 million children are exposed to the risk of child marriage due to hunger. In this post-pandemic era, a child who goes to bed hungry is 60% more likely to be married than their peers who do not experience hunger.^{vi} Conflict and an increase in extreme weather events are also pushing our global nutrition and food security goals off track.^{vii}

Hunger imperils children's futures. School meal programmes are pivotal, encouraging even the most disadvantaged families to send their children, especially girls, to school. By ensuring children receive vital nutrition, these programmes empower them to thrive and excel academically.^{viii}

In October 2023, on the sidelines of the first global summit of the School Meals Coalition, over 100 civil society organisations co-signed a robust call to action for equitable access to healthy school meals for all students.^{ix} The declaration came in response to a growing global hunger crisis, fuelled largely by conflict, inflation, and climate change.

This document highlights the myriad benefits of school meal programmes for children and adolescents, among them: alleviating hunger, increasing student enrolment – and retention, improving learning outcomes, strengthening household finances, protecting children from child labour and early marriage, stabilising communities, and many more benefits. Additionally, when associated with a series of interventions, school meal programmes can significantly improve health and nutrition outcomes.

School meal programmes

School meals are a cost-efficient investment: for every US\$1 invested in school meals, a return of up to US\$9 can be attributed to improvements in education, nutrition, health, social protection, and local economic and agricultural growth.¹ However, 73 million vulnerable children still lack access to school meals.^x

School meals are instrumental in improving access to education for children and adolescents. Food programmes boost enrolment, attendance, completion, and retention rates whilst also yielding other significant benefits. In Madagascar, school meals increased attendance by 14%.² In Ghana, school meals led to an 8.6% increase in boys' enrolment and a 6% increase in girls' enrolment.³ In Lao, many households reported that school meals meant they could save on food expenses and free up money for other family needs.⁴



^{vi} <https://www.wvi.org/newsroom/coronavirus-health-crisis/33-million-children-risk-child-marriage-due-post-pandemic-hunger>

^{vii} https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/GHR_sitrep12_01092023.pdf

^{viii} https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/GHR_sitrep12_01092023.pdf

^{ix} <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/global-summit-2023/>

^x <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2022>

Beyond education outcomes, school meals have a broader impact – especially when they include provisions for adolescent girls. Household savings from school meal programmes mean there is more money to keep girls in education, serving as a protective measure against early marriage, pregnancy, and domestic violence.⁵ Research demonstrates that girls who complete at least Grade 9 of their education are less likely to marry before 18, highlighting the importance of education in safeguarding their well-being.⁶ Depriving girls of education increases their vulnerability to forced marriage, early pregnancy, and gender-based violence.¹

Strengthening Commitment: Examining School Meal Policies and Funding

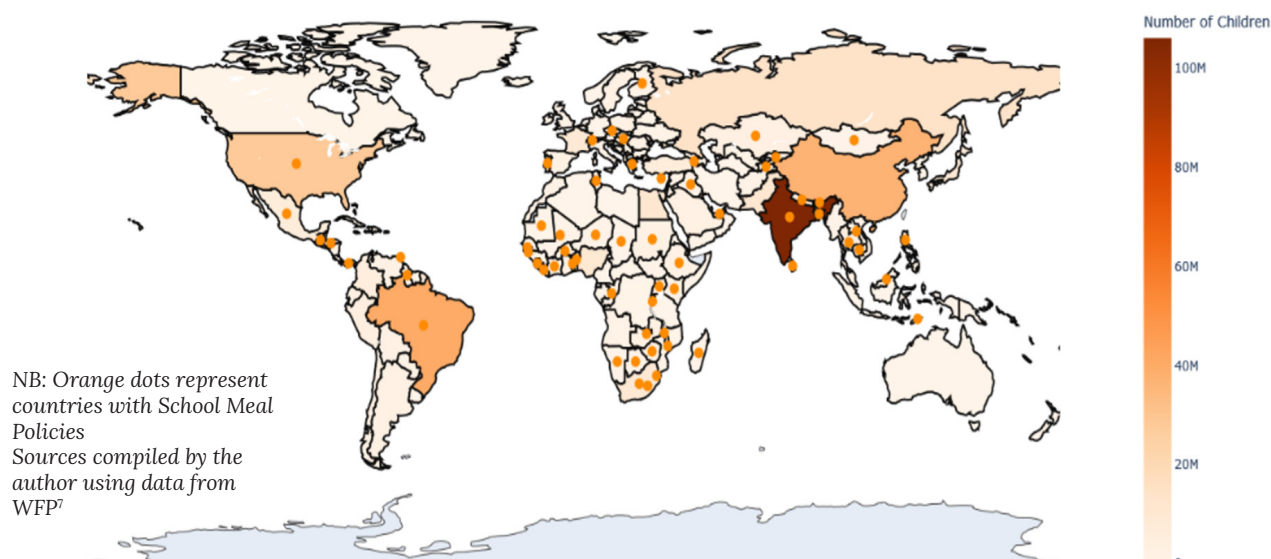
In 2022, 65 countries had school meal policies: 12 high-income countries, 14 upper/middle-income countries, 21 lower/middle-income countries, and 18 low-income countries. Many of them are in Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by South and East Asia, Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America (See Figure 1).⁷

These policies generally provide a framework for provision of school meal programmes including coverage, financial management, operational management (e.g. menu planning, task distribution, food procurement), etc. However, wealthier countries are more likely to have comprehensive nutrition, health, and food safety policies, highlighting gaps in lower-income nations. When combined with services like sanitation and health education, school meal programmes improve health and nutrition.⁷

National government are investing in school meals. In 2022, 99% of the overall global funding used to provide school meals comes from local governments owing to high- and middle-income contribution to their programmes.⁷ School meal programmes are in the right track as national engagements are prerequisite of sustainability.

Low-income countries are still highly dependent on international support. Despite their own economies contracting in recent years, low-income countries are increasing their domestic funding for school meals. The share of domestic funding for school meal programmes in low-income countries has increased from approximately 30% in 2020, to 45% in 2022 (US\$392 million). Meanwhile, donor support in these same countries has declined in both proportional and real terms, from approximately US\$267 million in 2020 to US\$214 million in 2022 due to competing priorities.⁷ In these contexts, in 2022, 55% of the school meals budget is from international donors.⁷

Figure 1: School meal programmes coverage and policies in 2022



Adolescents and most vulnerable children are left behind. Childhood and adolescence are balanced in their importance as periods in life to shape healthy habits that affect health and well-being and future adult health; outcomes which are passed on the next generation. Adolescents currently comprise 16% of the global population and 23% of the population of low income countries.⁸ Currently only Brazil, Finland, Estonia, and the US explicitly target both secondary and primary schools with meal policies, while Kenya and Rwanda are making progress in this direction.^{xi}

Countries where adolescent girls are highly exposed to early marriage need greater incentives to keep these girls at school, yet the global majority of school meal policies are only prioritising preschool and primary school groups.^{xii}

Low-income countries are yet to harness the full potential of school meals as a source of sustainable, healthier, and more nutritious meals

In high-income countries, over 60% of school meal programmes are equipped with adequate kitchens, canteens, clean water, and healthy diets, compared to less than 10% in low-income countries.⁹

Counting the types of food served in school meals shows how diverse the menu is and can often reflect its nutritional potential. On average, schools offer about 6.9 different types of food. High-income countries tend to have more variety (around 8.3 types such as cereal, legumes, nuts, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish), while low-income countries have fewer (about 5.2 types such as grain, cereals, legumes, nuts, and vegetables).⁹ Different regions vary in food diversity; South Asia/East Asia/Pacific region countries offer the most variety (around 8.6 types), while Sub-Saharan African countries have the least diversity (about 5.3 types).

Whilst secondary school meal provision can help in preventing child marriage in high-prevalence countries, school meal policies are not yet explicitly formulated for this purpose.



In Bangladesh, where 51% of young women are married before the age of 18, secondary schools are not among the beneficiaries of the meal programmes.¹⁰

Similarly in Ethiopia, where about 40% of young women are married before the age of 18, there are plans to provide meals to 50% of middle schools by 2024/2025 but the programme does not yet include secondary schools in its policy.¹¹

There's a positive correlation between school meals food diversity and whether a country has a national policy related to school meal programmes.

Integrated or multisectoral approaches to school meal programmes can enhance the meals' contribution to healthy diets. Of the 175 countries serving meals to students, only 42% provided supporting programmes – at least one of the following services: dental cleaning, deworming, drinking water, eye testing, handwashing, height and weight measurement, menstrual hygiene support, and water purification.⁷ Finally, 18% of schoolchildren in low-income countries receive free or subsidised meals, compared to 39% in lower/middle-income countries and 48% in upper/middle-income countries.^{xiii}

Accurate data on the environmental sustainability of school meals is lacking. To date, no global statistics attained at a school level are available to assess the contribution of school meals to environmental sustainability. A recent review identified key sustainability actions in school meal policies, such as sustainable

^{xi} Finnish Model; Rwanda

^{xii} Estonia

^{xiii} <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2022>

food procurement, educational activities, menu planning, local/organic food purchases, vegetarian/vegan options, and waste reduction. The findings highlight the need for broader, evidence-based sustainability guidelines in school meals programmes.^{xiv} The study also highlighted the power of local food procurement in leveraging sustainable school meal. However, little information is in-hands regarding procurement, especially at the school level.

Sustainable food procurement for school meals involves sourcing food in a way that benefits the environment, supports local economies, and ensures nutritional quality for students. By prioritizing local and seasonal produce, schools can reduce their carbon footprint, promote biodiversity, and stimulate the local economy, particularly by supporting small-scale farmers. This approach not only fosters environmental stewardship but also enhances the resilience and sustainability of the entire food system, making school meals a powerful tool for broader social and ecological impact.⁶

School Meals Coalition (SMC) is a pivotal force in addressing critical gaps and influencing policymakers to bolster school meal programmes worldwide

The inherent value of school meal programmes was widely recognised at the height of the pandemic in 2021. COVID-19 brought with it widespread challenges, leaving billions of children out of school, escalating poverty, and disrupting food supply chains. In that year, a group of UN member states launched the School Meals Coalition at the UN Food Systems Summit.^{xv} From all corners of the globe, 97 countries have joined the coalition, with 124 partners supporting governments in improving school meal programmes.

As a result of this international collaboration, 40 countries made national commitments to strengthen delivery of school meals, including through coverage expansion, quality improvement (more nutritious, more environmentally friendly, etc.), knowledge transfer, and experience-sharing.^{xvi}

International initiatives empower countries to advance their school meal programmes – even those without national commitment.

In Nepal's fiscal year 2023-2024, the school meal budget was US\$87 million, which translates to about 6% of the nation's education budget. After teacher's salaries, school meals were the second largest allocation in the education sector.^{xvii} The Haitian government has entered into a partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank and the Global Partnership for Education's Multiplier Fund to **expand its school meal programme by 20% and reach 1.5 million children in pre- and primary school.**^{xviii}



^{xiv} <https://doi.org/10.17037/PUBS.04671492>

^{xv} <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/>

^{xvi} <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/commitments/>

^{xvii} <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/school-meals-in-nepal/>

^{xviii} <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/haiti-innovative-financing-schoolmeals/>

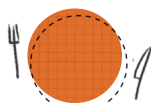
World Vision's Work on School Meal Programmes



Students are happier, concentrate more, and have better results. In Kilifi Kenya, World Vision programmes increased school enrolment – especially in the afternoon – by 45%. In areas of Sudan with school meal programmes, the primary to secondary school graduation-rate rose from 78.9% in 2020 to 92.8% in 2022.^{xix}



Students and families have healthier diets and habits. In 2022, World Vision and the World Food Programme (WFP) provided daily hot meals and dry take-home rations to girls and boys in 266 schools in East Darfur, South Darfur, and South Sudan. The initiative improved the nutrition status of 140,000 boys and girls.^{xx} In Kenya, the health education associated with meals programmes contributed to healthier habits, such as handwashing. In Burundi, a school garden initiative raised students' awareness of healthy and sustainable diets. In addition, thanks to the seeds donated to families, the local community was able to diversify both their production activities and their diets.



Students in conflict zones receive food at school. In 2022, in areas of South Sudan where conflict was affecting households' access to food, World Vision and WFP provided diversified nutritious food (e.g. maize, beans, salt, and oil) to 40,000 children in 47 schools, increasing their access to diversified nutritious food.^{xxi} The additional daily meal motivates students to go to school and families to support their attendance.



School meal programmes contribute to a more environmentally friendly food system. World Vision is supporting governments and communities in building climate-resilient school meal programmes. In Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Jordan, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, and Venezuela, World Vision provides food and nutrition education to promote healthy diets and lifestyles, including how to grow micronutrient-rich vegetables and fruits, as well as practical experience in food production and natural resource management. We provide this supplementary education through school health and nutrition clubs. In several countries, we are also collaborating with environmental management authorities in protecting the environment in and around the schools as well as building fuel-efficient stoves as strategies to protect the environment.^{xxii}



School meal programmes recognised as an international priority to achieve SDGs. World Vision is a pivotal partner in the School Meals Coalition, playing an active role in shaping the global agenda for school meals programming. With a focus on establishing robust safety nets for vulnerable children across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, World Vision's contributions are significant. During the School Meals Coalition Ministerial Meeting in Paris in October 2023, World Vision, along with over 100 civil society organisations, issued a Joint Civil Society Call to Action. This call advocates for equitable access to healthy, nutritious, and sustainably sourced school meals.^{xxiii}

^{xix} <https://www.wvi.org/stories/global-hunger-crisis/school-feeding-programme-tackles-hunger-and-malnutrition-among>; <https://www.wvi.org/newsroom/burundi/school-meals-can-change-world>

^{xx} <https://www.wvi.org/opinion/view/school-meals-are-life-changing-not-easy-abc>

^{xxi} <https://www.wvi.org/stories/south-sudan/meals-keep-south-sudans-children-school-long-term-peace-will-help-families>

^{xxii} <https://www.wvi.org/opinion/view/silent-heroes-cop28-power-school-meals-climate-action>

^{xxiii} https://schoolmealscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Civil-Society-Call-to-Action_School-Meals.pdf

Recommendations

To sustainably deliver school meal programmes to all children and adolescents, no matter their backgrounds, World Vision recommends the following:

National Governments

Update school meal policies to expand the coverage of school meals for primary and secondary school students by 2030. Despite national effort in both high, middle, and low-income countries, more investment are required to reach all children and adolescents.



Ensure that by 2030, school meals are expanded to encompass both primary and secondary schools, with a focus on reaching adolescents, particularly in low-income countries where early marriage and pregnancy rates are high. Recognising the significance of school meals in addressing challenges faced by children and adolescents, such as hunger and malnutrition, is vital for advancing progress towards the SDGs, as it promotes their overall well-being and academic success.

Integrate school meal programmes into planet-friendly policies. When properly designed and supported by adequate policy and regulatory frameworks, school meal programmes can catalyse regenerative agricultural practices, promoting biodiversity as well as climate-change resilience. Efforts on healthy and nutritious menus should be tailored to each context. In the global north, the focus should be on reducing the environmental footprint by incorporating plant-based proteins. In the global south, emphasis should be on linking environmental and social benefits, such as buying food locally and using nutritious underutilised species.

Actively involve children and communities in school meal programmes to promote transformational development that is both community-based and sustainable, with a special focus on children's needs. Expand health and nutrition education efforts and practical experience in food production to foster healthy diets, sustainable lifestyles, and environmental protection to all school meal programmes. [Support local smallholder farmers in supplying diverse, nutritious food to the school meals program through public procurement.](#) Through these collaborative measures, children and communities will play a vital role in building programmes to eliminate hunger and malnutrition.

Donors

Increase financial support for school meals programmes, by recognizing their importance in alleviating hunger, boosting student enrollment and retention, improving learning outcomes, strengthening household finances, protecting children from child labor and early marriage, stabilizing communities, and contributing to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Governments, Donors

Agree on indicators to measure hunger and malnutrition among school-age children is crucial. These indicators must be tailored to the specific requirements of different age groups, necessitating collaboration among stakeholders and robust data collection mechanisms. Capacity building initiatives and advocacy efforts will be essential for effectively implementing these indicators, empowering informed decision-making and enabling targeted interventions to enhance the health and well-being of children.

Civil Society

Reinforce the Joint Civil Society's Call to Action for equitable access to healthy, nutritious sustainable school meals by boosting government participation in the School Meal Coalition and strengthening national commitments.

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