

Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness. Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings and recommendations of World Vision's innovative initiative, Amplifying Children's Voices Through Social Accountability, which piloted participatory school feeding programme evaluations in Malawi, Tanzania, the Central African Republic, and Sri Lanka. The programme sought to prioritise children lived experiences and feedback in evaluating school meal services, recognising that their voices are indispensable in shaping services meant for them. Through scorecard sessions separated by gender, children evaluated five critical indicators: food availability, menu diversity and food choices, food quality, meal frequency, and satisfaction with services. These case studies highlight significant school meal delivery deficits across countries, including insufficient food portions, lack of menu variety, and irregular service quality.

A significant milestone was observed in the Central African Republic, where proactive responses to children's feedback substantially improved school meal service delivery. Implementing a twice-daily meal system, diversifying menus, and enhancing community oversight demonstrated the transformative power of child-centred social accountability approaches. These enhancements resulted in a 15% increase in school attendance and elevated student satisfaction from 60% to 85%.

In Malawi, similar gains were observed across Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs) in Ntcheu and Kapeni. Daily school feeding initiatives at Chimwemwe and PRAISE CBCCs led to marked increases in enrollment from 33 to 40 learners and from 79 to 109 learners, respectively. Highlighting the crucial role of collective action in addressing identified gaps, the community played a pivotal role by contributing labour, firewood, and water, reinforcing local ownership. Notably, a health assessment revealed zero cases of malnutrition among the children, affirming the meals' nutritional value. The programmes also contributed to greater classroom participation and community cohesion, as caregivers (especially women) gained time for economic activities.

This report provides compelling evidence for the need to scale up school feeding programmes by demonstrating their transformative impact across diverse country contexts. The findings show that well-designed school meals do more than improve

child nutrition and classroom performance; they also advance educational equity, strengthen accountability, and build community resilience.

The metrics used in this report offer governments a practical results-based framework for planning, monitoring, and scaling school meal programmes. By adopting similar performance indicators, governments can strengthen national school feeding systems and ensure that interventions are evidence-driven, equitable, and outcomesfocused.

These findings underscore the need to embed child-led monitoring into national school feeding strategies and regional nutrition accountability systems. The evidence-backed link between school meals and gains in learning, attendance, and child well-being proves that school feeding is not just a nutrition intervention but a powerful driver of educational equity and social development. Multi-sector policy dialogue bridging education, nutrition, and child rights is essential to scaling these results and embedding sustainability.

This comprehensive report details the participatory methodology, country-specific findings, thematic analyses, and strategic recommendations to enhance school feeding programmes and, by extension, the overall educational experiences and well-being of children in these contexts.



INTRODUCTION

School meal programmes have long been recognised as transformative interventions that advance children's education, nutrition, health, and overall development, particularly in low-resource settings. Beyond providing nourishment, these programmes serve as powerful incentives for school attendance, reduce dropout rates, enhance classroom concentration, and contribute to cognitive and psychosocial growth. They are often a critical lifeline for vulnerable children, especially in communities facing food insecurity and economic instability.

Global evidence affirms these impacts. According to the World Food Programme's (WFP) 2022 State of School Feeding Worldwide report,¹ school meals are among the most effective safety nets, currently reaching over 418 million children across 76 countries and significantly boosting enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes. A joint analysis by the World Bank and WFP shows that every US\$1 invested in school meals can generate up to US\$9 in economic returns through improved education, health, and productivity.² Similarly, UNICEF identifies school feeding as a cornerstone of integrated child development, particularly when linked to services like deworming, school health, and gender-responsive interventions.³

This growing body of evidence aligns with rising global momentum to scale and strengthen school feeding initiatives. The School Meals Coalition, launched in 2021⁴ and now endorsed by over 90 countries, has committed to ensuring that every child has access to a healthy meal in school by 2030, recognising school meals as a strategic investment in learning, equity, and national development. Similarly, the Global Alliance for Food Security, under the broader Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, calls for integrated and resilient food systems that prioritise children's nutrition and educational outcomes as development imperatives.

The participatory, child-led approach highlighted in this report reinforces these global commitments by demonstrating how children's voices can drive innovation and accountability in school feeding programmes. It supports the call to institutionalise

meaningful child participation in school nutrition policies—ensuring that programmes are not only more effective, but also more inclusive, equitable, and grounded in children's rights.

Despite these well-documented benefits, traditional approaches to evaluating school feeding programmes often exclude the perspectives of the primary beneficiaries: children themselves. These top-down models risk overlooking important experiential insights and perpetuating inefficiencies in service delivery. Recognising this gap, World Vision piloted the Amplifying Children's Voices Through Social Accountability project, a bold initiative that sought to reposition children not as passive recipients but as active agents of change.

The central goal of the initiative was to empower children to participate meaningfully in the evaluation of services that affect their daily lives. By centring children's lived experiences and feedback, the project aimed to reshape school feeding programmes into more inclusive, responsive, and impactful systems. This was not only a rights-based approach, but also a strategic one: children, as firsthand beneficiaries, possess unique and practical knowledge about what works and what doesn't.

Implemented across four diverse country contexts, each with its own sociopolitical and educational challenges, the initiative introduced a participatory methodology that captured both qualitative and quantitative insights from children. These insights informed local-level improvements and broader programme reforms. The project demonstrated that child-led feedback mechanisms can uncover systemic blind spots, drive innovation, and elevate accountability at all levels of school feeding interventions.

This report documents that journey, analysing progress, challenges, and the transformational impact of incorporating child-led feedback into programme decision-making. It serves as both a record of achievements and a roadmap for scaling inclusive, participatory models in other education and nutrition programmes globally.

¹ World Food Programme (2022) – State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022

² World Bank and WFP (2020) – Smart Investments for Economic Recovery

³ UNICEF (2020) – Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030

⁴ School Meals Coalition – https://schoolmealscoalition.org

METHODOLOGY

This initiative applied a structured, participatory scorecard tool rooted in World Vision's Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) approach, a globally recognised social accountability methodology designed to strengthen the relationship between communities and government by enabling local voices to shape the delivery of essential services. The CVA model is particularly effective for improving school meal programmes through community engagement, service monitoring, and evidence-based advocacy.

The CVA methodology follows a three-phase approach:

- Phase I: Enabling Citizen Engagement –
 Communities are sensitised on relevant
 legislation and governance processes
 surrounding school feeding. Policies
 are simplified and disseminated through
 brochures and community radio. This phase
 includes identification of key barriers such as
 limited meal coverage, poor food quality, and
 infrastructure gaps.
- Phase II: Community Gatherings and Scorecard Monitoring – Inclusive meetings

- bring together children, parents, educators, CSOs, faith leaders, and local authorities. Monitoring standards are selected collaboratively, and community scorecards are used to evaluate school meal services. Special emphasis is placed on vulnerable groups, including girls, children with disabilities, and younger learners, to ensure equity and meaningful participation.
- Phase III: Advocacy and Service Improvement

 Evidence gathered from scorecards and interface meetings is used to influence budget allocations, infrastructure investment, and policy change. Data from multiple countries are fed into the CVA global database, allowing for macro-level trend analysis and global advocacy efforts.

In this initiative, CVA was adapted for direct engagement with children, recognising them not only as beneficiaries but as active stakeholders. Gender-separated focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted across selected schools and CBCCs in Central African Republic (CAR), Sri Lanka, Malawi, and Tanzania.



A total of 283 children participated in the consultations across the four countries:

Malawi: 85 children

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Central African Republic (CAR): 67 children



Tanzania: 72 children



Sri Lanka: 59 children



Children were invited to score five key dimensions of their school feeding experience:







2 Menu Diversity and **Food Choices**

3. Food Quality





5. Satisfaction with Services

Facilitators employed a child-friendly, emoji-based scoring system:





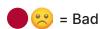
= Very Good















This visual scale enabled participation from younger children and those with limited literacy.

The process also included narrative discussions where children elaborated on their scores, shared stories, and proposed improvements. These qualitative insights were coded thematically and triangulated with the quantitative scorecard data to identify cross-cutting trends, priority concerns, and actionable recommendations.

Overall, this methodology deepened local accountability, enhanced child voice in programme monitoring, and contributed to a growing evidence base for national and global advocacy on school feeding

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC FINDINGS



In Tanzania, the participatory scorecard sessions were conducted in two primary schools: Pozo Primary School, which operated a meal programme, and Kwapara Primary School, which did not. The evaluations provided nuanced insights into children's experiences in both contexts.

At Pozo Primary School, although a meal was provided daily, students expressed dissatisfaction with the quantity and variety of food. Many children reported that the portions were insufficient to meet their dietary needs, affecting their ability to concentrate during lessons. The menu lacked diversity, consisting of mainly of boiled beans, and there were occasional concerns about food hygiene and preparation quality. Students suggested increasing meal variety, incorporating vegetables, and improving cooking practices. Their request for a second daily meal reflects not only their lived experience

of hunger but also aligns with international best practices on child nutrition, such as WHO and UNICEF guidelines on infant and young child feeding,⁵ which emphasise the need for frequent, nutrient-dense meals to support healthy growth, cognitive development, and sustained attention in learning environments. The scorecard sessions also revealed issues with meal distribution processes at Pozo Primary School, where long queues and inefficient service created delays and further dissatisfaction. Children recommended enhancing distribution logistics and adding a second meal daily to sustain their energy throughout the school day.

Conversely, students at Kwapara Primary School, where no meal programme existed, highlighted the severe impact of food scarcity on their learning and well-being. Children reported hunger-related discomfort, poor concentration, and a diminished interest in attending school. This underscored the critical role that school meals play in educational participation and equity.

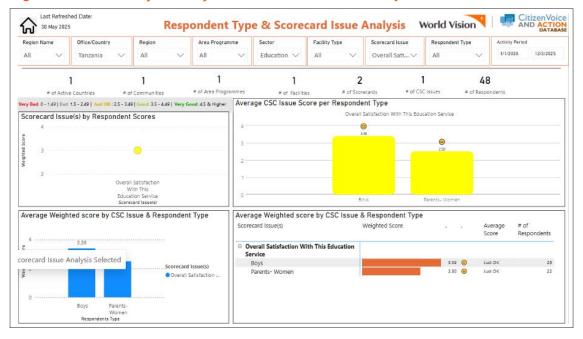


⁵ https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/infant-and-young-child-feeding

Table 1: Summary of the outcomes of school meal programme evaluations in Tanzania

Performand Measure	e Insights from	ı Children	Recommendations
Food Availabil	At Pozo Primary, chilo that food was availabl in quantity. At Kwapar meals were provided, without support.	e but insufficient in in a Primary, no	ncrease food portions at Pozo and ntroduce a school meal programme at Kwapara to ensure equitable access.
Menu Diversity Food Ch	•	l more diverse a , including in neals more s	Add more diverse foods such as vegetables and legumes to mprove nutritional value and dietary satisfaction.
Quality of Food	Students shared that lacked essential ingre cooking oil and adeque beans, which compro overall meal quality.	dients, such as in it is it is it is it.	ncrease the quantities of essential ngredients to enhance flavour, nutrition, and meal satisfaction.
Meal Frequen	At Pozo, children rece meal per day and exp cy for an additional meal their energy and learr	ressed a desire s to better meet r	Serve meals twice daily to better support children's learning, focus, and nutritional needs.
Satisfac with Ser	in food convice which	ues and delays con make the	mprove the efficiency of meal distribution to reduce wait times and enhance the overall service experience.

Figure 1: Overall satisfaction of education service community scorecard results – Tanzania



From the scorecard dashboard, the average score in relation to overall satisfaction of the education service is a lower average of "just OK" as per the smiley scale. This represents a less-than-ideal rating by the children, parents, and other stakeholders with regard to the performance of the education service overall, including access to school meals.



Malawi

In Malawi, scorecard sessions were conducted in three primary schools, offering a rich comparative perspective on children's perceptions of school feeding programmes. Notably, the gender-disaggregated sessions revealed divergent experiences between boys and girls. Girls generally rated meal availability positively, appreciating the consistent provision of lunch. However, they called for year-round availability to avoid interruptions in service. Boys, in contrast, expressed deep dissatisfaction with food availability, citing frequent inconsistencies and unavailability on some school days.

Both groups took issue with the monotony of the menu, which was primarily limited to porridge, and advocated for the inclusion of alternative options such as rice porridge, sweet potatoes, and other nutritious, locally available foods. The quality of meals was also a recurring concern, with students describing the porridge as tasteless, watery, and poorly prepared. Girls recommended adding sugar and other flavourenhancing ingredients, while boys emphasised the need for better meal preparation standards.

"Sometimes the porridge tastes like plain water, and we stay hungry until we get home," said Blessings, a 12-year-old student at Chimwemwe Primary School. "I wish we could have something different, like sweet potatoes or rice porridge, even once a week."



Children unanimously rated meal frequency as inadequate, with a single daily meal insufficient to meet their nutritional needs. They requested an additional meal to support their learning and physical activity throughout the day.

"By afternoon, most of the class is tired and sleepy. If we had another meal, we could learn better," explained Patrick, a 13-year-old boy from PRAISE CBCC.





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Teachers echoed these concerns. Mrs. Kamwendo, a teacher at one of the schools, noted: "We see a clear difference in attention and behaviour on days when food is delayed or insufficient. A second meal could make a big difference, especially for children who walk long distances to school."



"Sometimes the big kids push us, and we don't get enough food," said Memory, age 10. "We want everyone to be treated fairly."



Dissatisfaction also extended to service delivery, where both boys and girls reported inadequate portions and issues with the attitudes of caregivers during distribution. Children expressed

particular frustration over perceived favouritism and delays.

These narratives highlight the importance of not only improving food quality and quantity but also addressing the dignity and equity of the feeding experience itself.



Table 2: Summary of the outcomes of school meal programme evaluations in Malawi

Performance Measure	Insights from Children	Recommendations
Food Availability	Girls generally rated food availability as "very good," while boys described it as "very bad" due to frequent inconsistencies. Meals were not available every school day, and portions were often insufficient.	Ensure consistent meal provision across all school days, with adequate portions for all students.
Menu Diversity and Food Choices	Both girls and boys expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of variety. Meals were monotonous— mainly porridge, with few to no alternative options.	Introduce more diverse meal options, such as rice porridge, sweet potatoes, and other locally available foods.
Quality of Food	Students frequently described the meals as tasteless and watery, citing the lack of basic ingredients (e.g., sugar) and poor cooking practices, including undercooked food.	Improve overall meal preparation quality; add flavour- enhancing ingredients like sugar where appropriate.
Meal Frequency	Students from all groups reported that one meal per day was not enough to sustain their energy and learning, expressing a strong desire for a second serving.	Increase meal frequency to two servings per school day to support learning and well- being.
Satisfaction with Services	Students voiced low satisfaction due to long queues, uneven distribution, and stressful service experiences. The process felt unfair and led to dissatisfaction with the overall service.	Improve the meal distribution process to ensure fairness, reduce wait times, and provide consistent portions.

Figure 2: Overall satisfaction of education service community scorecard results – Malawi



Data from the CVA database scorecard dashboard for Malawi reveals alarming dissatisfaction with education services: children rated overall satisfaction as "Very Bad" on the smiley scale. Out of 2,959 respondents—including boys, girls, parents, and service providers—overwhelmingly negative feedback highlights critical gaps in service delivery, most notably in access to school meals.



Progress in Malawi

In Malawi, the rollout of Early Childhood Development (ECD) school feeding programmes has led to notable progress across participating Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs). At **Chimwemwe CBCC** in the Kapeni Area Programme, a daily feeding initiative was introduced, providing children with a hot meal prepared from locally available ingredients such as corn, soya beans, and sugar. Within a few months of implementation, enrollment rose from 33 to 40 children, many of whom now walk from remote villages just to access the daily meal and learning environment.

Likewise, at **PRAISE CBCC** in Ntcheu District, a new ECD feeding programme was launched in April 2025. This initiative also saw rapid uptake, with enrolment increasing from 79 to 109 learners. The children receive daily servings of Corn Soya Blend (CSB), a fortified and nutritious food blend that meets essential early childhood nutritional needs. Both CBCCs have received strong support from parents, who volunteer their time to cook, clean, collect firewood, and

fetch water, demonstrating a high degree of community ownership. Despite infrastructure limitations such as inadequate sanitation and lack of water sources, communities have maintained clean, safe, and welcoming environments for their children.

The absence of malnutrition among the enrolled children reinforces the importance of embedding ECD feeding into national child health and nutrition policies, with linkages to school readiness, early cognitive development, and community resilience.

These results align with broader global recommendations to prioritise the first five years of life in nutrition policy and underscore the role of integrated ECD platforms in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2, 3, and 4). By institutionalising ECD feeding within Malawi's national development frameworks, policymakers can maximise returns on investment in early childhood while addressing persistent equity gaps in health, education, and food security.

Impact

The impact of the school feeding programmes has been multifaceted and deeply felt. Firstly, improved access to regular, nutritious meals has enhanced children's physical health, energy levels, and classroom participation. Teachers and caregivers have reported improved attention spans, classroom engagement, and emotional well-being among learners.

"Before the feeding programme started, children would arrive late, hungry, and tired. Now they're more alert, they participate more, and they smile more," shared Mrs. Chikondi, a teacher at Chimwemwe CBCC. "The difference in their confidence and concentration is remarkable."

Notably, a health and nutrition assessment at PRAISE CBCC found no cases of malnutrition, reinforcing the nutritional value of the meals provided.

"I used to feel weak and sleepy in class, but now I have energy and enjoy learning," said Thoko, a 10-year-old learner at PRAISE CBCC.

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The programmes have also had important ripple effects beyond the classroom. With their children safely fed and engaged, caregivers—especially mothers—are able to allocate time to pursue small-scale income-generating activities, contributing to family well-being and local economic resilience. *Maria*, a mother of three from Ntcheu District, began volunteering as a cook at PRAISE CBCC. With her mornings free after preparing meals, she started a small roadside stall selling vegetables and home-baked fritters.

"Before, I stayed at home all day. Now, I make enough to buy soap, sugar, and sometimes even save a little. The feeding programme gave me time—and a reason—to try something new," Maria shared. Her income, though modest, has contributed to household expenses and improved her family's overall food security.

Additionally, the programmes have helped to strengthen communities' social cohesion, as collective involvement in food preparation, school management, and oversight has brought parents, teachers, and leaders together around a shared goal.

In essence, the feeding programmes have not only supported child development and school attendance, but have also served as a practical vehicle for community empowerment and resilience-building.





Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic, participatory monitoring took place in two primary schools—one with an established meal programme and another without. The children's feedback highlighted severe food shortages, with portions often failing to match the actual number of students present. Many children reported missing meals due to insufficient supplies.

Menu diversity was limited, typically comprising rice, oil, and beans. Students expressed a strong desire for more variety, particularly the inclusion of vegetables. The quality of food was inconsistent, with concerns about undercooked meals, small portion sizes, and a lack of essential ingredients. Students also raised serious accountability issues,

alleging that some kitchen staff diverted food for personal use.

To address these challenges, children recommended adjusting food quantities to match daily attendance, diversifying menus, improving cooking standards, and replacing staff implicated in food mismanagement. They also called for increasing meal frequency to twice daily to better support learning and health.

This model demonstrates that embedding child feedback mechanisms can be transformative and should be integrated into routine monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks. The direct link between children's voices and tangible programme reforms—such as larger portions, better food quality, and stronger oversight—provides a compelling policy case for institutionalising child-led social accountability across education and nutrition systems.

Table 3: Summary of the outcomes of school meal programme evaluations in Central African Republic

Perform	nance Measure	Insights from Children	Recommendations
	Food Availability	Children reported that the amount of food provided often did not match actual school attendance, resulting in inadequate portions and leaving some students without food.	Adjust food portions to reflect student attendance to avoid shortages and ensure full coverage.
	Menu Diversity and Food Choices	Meals typically consisted only of rice, oil, and beans. Students expressed a strong desire for more variety, including the addition of vegetables and other nutritious options.	Introduce diverse food options, including vegetables, to enhance both nutrition and meal appeal.
Š	Quality of Food	Portions were sometimes split among multiple students, and meals were occasionally undercooked or missing essential ingredients. Children noted poor preparation and taste.	Distribute food based on actual attendance and replace cooks implicated in food diversion to ensure quality and accountability.
	Meal Frequency	Meals were only served once daily, which children said left them hungry and unfocused during school hours. They expressed a clear need for an additional daily meal.	Increase meal frequency to two servings per school day to better support learning and child well- being.
9	Satisfaction with Services	While children appreciated the food support, they raised serious concerns about food being diverted by staff for personal use, leading to unfair and unequal distribution.	Address accountability concerns by replacing staff involved in diversion and strengthening oversight for fair distribution.

Progress in Central African Republic

Following the participatory monitoring conducted in August 2024, WVCAR launched comprehensive reform of the school meal programme in response to the urgent feedback provided by children; these reforms were tested in February 2025. These reforms were designed not only to address immediate issues of food quantity and quality but also to restore trust in a system that had been weakened by inconsistencies and mismanagement. Key improvements included:



Introduction of two daily meals:

Recognising that a single meal was insufficient to support children's learning and energy needs, WVCAR introduced a structured meal schedule of breakfast and lunch daily. This shift ensured that children began their day with nourishment and remained focused throughout the school hours.



"Before, I was hungry and tired in class. Now, we get two meals, and I can focus on my lessons. I love the red beans—they make the food tastier!" said Amina, a 10-year-old student, highlighting both the nutritional and emotional value of the change.





Portion calibration based on attendance:

Food distribution was realigned to match daily attendance logs, eliminating the previous issue of shortages and unfair distribution practices. Every child present received an adequate serving, reflecting a commitment to equity and planning precision.



Menu diversification and cultural appropriateness: Children had voiced dissatisfaction with repetitive meals lacking nutritional balance. In response, the programme incorporated vegetables

and red beans, and piloted the inclusion of fish to enhance both taste and dietary variety. These changes not only improved nutritional value but also resonated with local food preferences. Jean, a 12-year-old student leader, played a key role in this shift. After participating in the feedback sessions, he advocated for adding fish to the meals. His efforts led to the successful trial inclusion of fish, demonstrating the value of child-led solutions in programme design.



Food quality and hygiene

enhancements: New cooks were recruited and trained on safe food preparation practices, proper hygiene, and child-friendly service delivery. This action addressed prior concerns of undercooked food and cleanliness, ensuring meals were both safe and palatable.



Establishment of parent and community

oversight: Community stakeholders, including parents, were mobilised to oversee food preparation and distribution, enhancing transparency and fostering shared responsibility. This participatory governance helped prevent food diversion, which had previously been identified as a major issue.



Impact

The impact of these interventions was profound, both quantitatively and qualitatively:



School attendance: A notable 15% increase in student attendance was recorded within six months, underscoring the powerful link between reliable food access and school participation.



Student satisfaction: The proportion of students expressing satisfaction with the meal programme grew from 60% to 85%, reflecting the tangible improvements in service delivery and food quality.



Enhanced concentration and participation: Teachers reported marked improvements in students' classroom attentiveness, energy levels, and engagement, particularly during

afternoon lessons, which had previously suffered from fatigue-related drop-offs.



Community trust and cohesion:

The involvement of caregivers in food oversight contributed to greater community ownership, reduced conflict over resource allocation, and increased

volunteerism. Parents expressed renewed confidence in the system and a willingness to contribute time and resources.



Empowerment of children as advocates:

The feedback loop established through the scorecard sessions empowered children to speak out about their needs and expectations. Children like Amina, Jean, and Marie became vocal champions of change, influencing not just meals but broader aspects of school life such as hygiene, respect, and fairness.



Performance Measure	Mixed Group	Boys Group	Girls Group	Comments	Suggestions
Food Availability	Good	Good	Good	Food quantities now align with attendance, ensuring all students receive meals.	Continue monitoring attendance and maintain reserves for unexpected spikes.
Menu Diversity	Agreed	Agreed	Agreed	Vegetables and red beans added; variety still limited. Boys want fish; girls want fruit.	Introduce fruit, cassava, and affordable protein like fish.
Food Quality	Good	Good	Good	Meals are well-cooked and nutritious. Hygiene improved.	Ensure consistent quality; train cooks on diverse, nutritious recipes.
Meal Service Frequency	Agreed	Good	Good	Two daily meals served at 8:30 AM and 11:30 AM.	Maintain and monitor the dual meal schedule.
Satisfaction with Services	Good	Good	Good	Trust in new cooks; transparency in distribution appreciated.	Increase parental oversight; engage students in feedback and planning.

These achievements in the Central African Republic stand as a testament to what is possible when children's voices are not only heard but acted upon, and when communities are invited to co-create solutions that advance equity and dignity in school feeding programmes.



Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, scorecard sessions were conducted in three schools located in the Eastern and Northern provinces. The participatory process achieved critical insights into the school meal programme's strengths and areas for improvement.

Food availability was generally reliable, though occasional shortages occurred due to fluctuating student attendance. Students expressed appreciation for the programme but emphasised the importance of aligning food quantities with actual attendance records to prevent meal shortages.

The menu predominantly featured rice and lentils, with children requesting additional vegetables, fruits, and occasional servings of fish to enhance

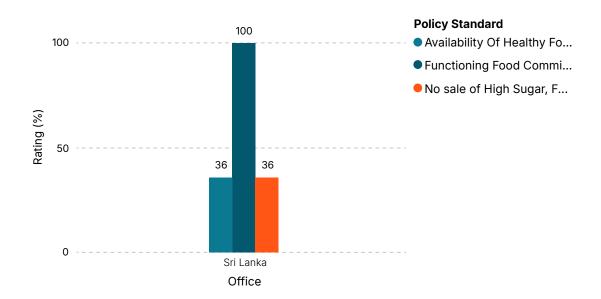
taste and nutritional value. While the preparation quality was commended for consistency, students suggested incorporating coconut milk and traditional spices to improve meal palatability.

Improving meal quality through the use of culturally familiar ingredients like coconut milk not only enhances taste but also strengthens the cultural relevance and sustainability of the programme by drawing on local food systems and cooking practices. This emphasis on culturally appropriate meals reinforces both the nutritional goals and community ownership of the school feeding programme, aligning with broader efforts to localise food sourcing and support smallholder farmers.

These insights highlight the importance of tailoring school meal programmes to local contexts not just for nutritional adequacy, but for cultural resonance and long-term sustainability.

Figure 3: Assessed standards from government policy related to school meals – Sri Lanka

Compliance Rating by Office and Policy Standard



Monitoring data from 14 schools indicates that while all schools have functional food committees in place, only about a third reported access to healthy foods. Similarly, just one in three schools were found to be complying with government food quality standards—such as limiting high sugar and salt content—highlighting significant gaps in adherence to official nutrition policies.

Children also advocated for a morning snack to complement the lunchtime meal, arguing that it would improve their concentration during morning lessons. Satisfaction with services was high, particularly regarding the kindness of staff, though there were concerns about kitchen hygiene and occasional service delays.

Table 4: Summary of the outcomes of school meal programme evaluations in Sri Lanka

Performanc	e Insights from Chil	dren Recommendations
Measure		
Food Availab	Food was generally available occasional shortages occurre fluctuating attendance. Child food quantities did not alway number of students present, inadequate portions on some	ded due to daily attendance to ensure consistent provision and avoid shortages.
Menu Diversit and Foo Choice	od and occasional servings of fi	or greater appropriate ingredients such as vegetables, fruits, and fish to enrich
Quality Food	of While meal preparation was of students suggested incorporating ingredients like coconut milk spices to improve flavour. Meas bland and lacking cultural	ating incorporating culturally preferred and traditional ingredients to improve taste and acceptability.
Meal Freque	Meals were only served once Children reported hunger dur morning hours and suggeste before lunch to help sustain of and energy throughout the so	ing the alongside the main meal to maintain energy, focus, and learning performance.
Satisfar with Service	and inadequate hygiene in th	ut delays protocols and improve service delivery to reduce delays and ensure a safe, clean environment.



THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Thematic analysis from all four countries uncovered several recurring issues and insights that cut across different contexts. These themes underscore systemic challenges and provide a foundation for broader programmatic improvements:



Inadequate portion sizes: Despite the existence of school feeding programmes, children consistently reported that the food provided was insufficient. These shortages not only limited their physical energy for learning and participation but also undermined the very purpose of the programmes. Addressing this requires matching rations with actual enrolment and accounting for fluctuating attendance rates.



Limited menu diversity: Monotonous meals, often limited to a single staple like porridge or rice with beans, were a universal concern. Children voiced their desire for meals enriched with vegetables, proteins, and culturally familiar ingredients. Lack of diversity not only reduces meal appeal but can lead to long-term nutrient deficiencies.



Single daily meal insufficiency:

Providing only one meal per day proved insufficient to sustain children's attention and physical endurance. Children in all settings expressed the need for a second meal or snack to ensure they could remain active and focused throughout the school day. This gap disproportionately affects vulnerable children who may not have access to nutritious meals at home.



Service delivery inefficiencies and inequity: Children at several schools highlighted issues like long queues, unfair distribution, and even food diversion. These inefficiencies led to dissatisfaction and, in some cases, contributed to mistrust in the programme. Improving logistical processes and strengthening transparency are critical to restoring confidence.



Value of meaningful child participation:

The most transformative insight was the power of involving children in decision-making. Their feedback brought to light previously overlooked concerns and demonstrated that children are capable evaluators who understand the nuances of their school environment.



Community ownership and parental involvement: Across countries

involvement: Across countries, programmes with high levels of community involvement—especially parent volunteers—demonstrated greater resilience, accountability, and long-term sustainability. Strengthening this engagement is a vital strategy for improving school meal systems.

Equity and inclusion are essential to future programme design and monitoring. While the participatory model surfaced many valuable insights, future evaluations should include specific indicators for the inclusion and experiences of children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups. Centring these voices is essential to ensuring school feeding programmes leave no child behind and contribute to broader goals of social justice and equity in education and nutrition.



TRENDS AND LESSONS LEARNED



The implementation of participatory school feeding programmes across diverse contexts has generated valuable insights that reinforce the power of child-centred, community-driven, and rights-based approaches. These lessons underscore how children's voices and enabling local ownership can lead to more accountable, inclusive, and sustainable services—particularly for the most vulnerable.



School Meals Unlock Access to Education

Increased enrolment at centres like Chimwemwe and PRAISE CBCCs demonstrates that a daily nutritious meal is a powerful incentive for school attendance. For many families in remote or food-insecure areas, school feeding transforms education from an aspiration into a daily reality.



Children's Voices Drive Meaningful Change

In the Central African Republic, children's feedback led directly to reforms in meal frequency, quality, and oversight. When children are meaningfully engaged,

programmes become more responsive, equitable, and effective. Institutionalising children's voices in decision-making processes enhances transparency and accountability.



Community Ownership Sustains Impact

From meal preparation to logistical support, caregiver participation has made school feeding programmes more resilient and cost-effective. Local ownership enhances commitment and keeps programmes grounded in community needs.



Infrastructure Must Keep Pace with Demand

As enrolment increases, pressure on classrooms, kitchens, latrines, and water supply becomes a challenge. Expanding school feeding efforts requires parallel investment in infrastructure to maintain safety, dignity, and learning outcomes.



School Meals Promote Gender Equity and Family Resilience

By providing care and nutrition during school hours, feeding programmes reduce the caregiving burden—particularly on women—and open space for income-generating activities, education, and civic engagement. This contributes to household stability and gender equality.



Good Nutrition Is Foundational to Child Well-Being

Regular access to balanced meals improves children's attention, emotional regulation, and readiness to learn. School meals directly support child development and enable long-term educational success.



Consistency Builds Trust and Belonging

The shift to two daily meals in CAR not only addressed hunger but also created routine and stability for children. Predictable nutrition improved school attendance and fostered a stronger sense of connection to school and community.



Local Leadership Enhances Transparency

Parent-led oversight structures have played a critical role in strengthening trust, preventing food misuse, and resolving issues. When combined with feedback from children, these community mechanisms contribute to a robust accountability system.



Integrated Services Deliver Greater Impact

School feeding programmes that are linked with health, hygiene, and education services tend to be more effective in

advancing holistic child development. Multisector collaboration is key to amplifying the impact of interventions on learning and well-being.

These lessons highlight the importance of cross-sectoral policy integration, where ministries of education, health, and social development jointly plan, finance, and monitor school feeding programmes. Embedding children's voices into national monitoring and evaluation systems, along with community-led oversight, is essential to building resilient, inclusive programmes that uphold every child's right to learn, grow, and thrive.



CONCLUSION

This multi-country participatory monitoring demonstrated the transformative power of placing children at the heart of school meals programme accountability. By recognising children as active agents of change, this initiative did more than assess service delivery; it redefined what meaningful participation can achieve. Across four different national contexts, children's insights sparked tangible reforms, from introducing a second daily meal in CAR to improving meal quality and community participation in Malawi.

This child-centred, rights-based model has not only improved the nutritional and educational well-being of children but has also deepened trust, fostered ownership, and strengthened the overall impact of school feeding programmes.

The process has proven that when children's voices are listened to, respected, and acted upon, programme outcomes improve dramatically.

This conclusion underscores a compelling truth: effective development interventions cannot be fully realised without including the voices of those most affected. The findings support governments' adoption of participatory performance evaluations as a core pillar of national school feeding policies. It is recommended that participatory monitoring that includes children be institutionalised as a routine component of programme management and that communities, caregivers, and children remain actively involved in evaluating and refining these essential services.



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To build on the progress documented in this report and create a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable school feeding system, the following strategic actions are recommended:



Adopt Performance-Based Frameworks to Guide Scale-Up

This report provides compelling evidence for the need to scale up school feeding programmes by demonstrating their transformative impact across diverse country contexts. The findings show that well-designed school meals do more than improve child nutrition and classroom performance—they also advance educational equity, strengthen accountability, and build community resilience. The report applies performance indicators such as food availability, menu diversity and food choices, food quality, meal frequency, and satisfaction with services. These metrics offer governments a practical, results-based framework for planning, monitoring, and scaling national school feeding systems. By adopting similar indicators, governments can ensure interventions are evidence-driven, equitable, and outcomes-focused.



Institutionalise Participatory Child-Led Monitoring

Embedding structured, recurring scorecard sessions into school meal programmes is essential for ensuring that children's voices shape programme design, resource allocation, and delivery. It is critical that national and subnational governments, in partnership with implementing agencies, integrate child feedback mechanisms into routine planning, budgeting, and performance reviews.



Ensure Year-Round Meal Availability and Adequacy

Consistent, daily access to nutritious meals across all schools is fundamental to realising the full educational and developmental potential of learners. Ensuring adequacy of rations based on

real-time school attendance requires commitment from ministries of education, finance, and social development, in coordination with local education authorities and partners.



Promote Menu Diversity through Local Sourcing

Incorporating locally available, nutrient-dense, and culturally appropriate foods into school menus is essential to improving nutrition outcomes and reinforcing food system resilience. This strategy demands collaboration between procurement agencies, school feeding programmes, and local agriculture actors to align nutrition objectives with local economic development.





Establish and Enforce Meal Quality and Safety Standards

Maintaining high-quality and safe meal delivery across all sites requires clear, enforceable standards. Standardised cooking protocols, nutrition benchmarks, and hygiene guidelines are essential. Regular capacity building for food handlers and routine meal audits must be integrated into national and local accountability frameworks to protect children's health and ensure service integrity.



Invest in Enabling Infrastructure for Safe and Dignified Delivery

Scaling school feeding demands strategic investments in enabling infrastructure—such as hygienic kitchens, clean water access, latrines, food storage, and safe, inclusive eating areas. Ensuring dignity and safety in meal delivery requires coordinated financing and infrastructure development from education, health, and public works ministries, supported by donors and development partners.



Deepen Community Engagement and Accountability

Strengthening the role of parents, caregivers, and local leaders in school feeding governance is essential for sustainability. Formalising school- and community-level oversight committees promotes local ownership, enhances transparency, and fosters a culture of shared responsibility.



Develop Feedback and Learning Loops Institutionalising mechanisms for sharing

monitoring findings with children and communities is essential to close the accountability loop. Communicating how feedback has led to programme changes reinforces participation, builds trust, and promotes a responsive, rights-based approach to service delivery.



Position School Meals as a Cross-Sectoral Investment and Policy Priority

It is essential to elevate school meals within national and regional policy frameworks as a multi-sectoral investment in child development, education, health, and equity. Participatory evidence should inform advocacy for sustained public financing, alignment with climate resilience and social protection strategies, and legal recognition of school meals as a universal entitlement. School meals must be acknowledged as a strategic instrument for advancing learning outcomes, gender equality, and social justice, particularly for the most vulnerable.

These recommendations outline a transformative pathway toward sustainable school feeding systems anchored in dignity, child agency, and shared responsibility. By embedding child participation, community leadership, and policy integration, governments and development partners can ensure that school meals not only feed children but also nourish learning, equity, and hope.





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