



**School
Meals
Coalition**



**Sustainable
Financing
Initiative**
for School Health and
Nutrition

Report Summary

School feeding and the Sustainable Development Goals

An agenda to combat child hunger, boost education,
transform food systems and strengthen equity

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This is a summary of the paper *School feeding and the Sustainable Development Goals: An agenda to combat child hunger, boost education, transform food systems and strengthen equity*.

The full paper can be read [here](#)

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National school feeding programmes, an invention of the early 20th century, retain a profound relevance for some of the greatest human development challenges facing the world in the third decade of the 21st century.

The first great movement for school meals was a response to mass hunger and poverty among children attending school in today's rich world. It laid one of the foundation stones for modern welfare states. Today, mass hunger and extreme poverty among children remain deeply entrenched in the poorest countries of the world, destroying educational opportunities on an epic scale. The international community is fighting a losing battle to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which include the eradication of poverty, zero hunger, and quality education for all. Expanding the reach of school meal programmes could turn the tide in this battle, bringing hope into the lives of millions of children and supporting the development of more sustainable and equitable food systems.

Throughout their history, school feeding programmes have been at the heart of the struggle for social justice and fairer societies.

In 1904, a parliamentary commission in the United Kingdom concluded that it was 'the height of cruelty' to open the door to universal schooling while allowing poverty to rob children of the opportunity to learn. Shortly thereafter, the country's first school meal programme was launched. In the United States, school meal campaigns were part of the movement against child poverty and for civil rights. In India, civil society organisations fought and won a landmark case that established access to a nutritious school meal as a legally enforceable human right. Brazil's national school feeding programme was an integral part of the country's 'zero hunger' strategy, which, in the decade after 2003, produced one of the greatest human development

success stories of our era. The history of school feeding movements from their inception to our own time represents a resource and a source of inspiration for what is achievable in the future.

With a concerted international effort, this story could be projected onto the world stage, catalysing a recovery of the SDGs. Many of the concerns that motivated the first great movement for school meals are of profound relevance in our times. The face of extreme poverty and hunger today is increasingly the face of a child living in low-income and lower-middle-income countries (LICs and LMICs). Malnutrition among children in school is a source of suffering and ill-health on a global scale. It is a moral indictment of national efforts and the state of international cooperation. It is also a powerful barrier to learning. School meal programmes have demonstrated the potential to lower this barrier, enabling children to secure the education that offers a passport from poverty into a life of expanded opportunities. Increased access to school feeding could play a critical role in accelerating the prospects for human development in countries, creating new opportunities for more dynamic and inclusive growth.

School feeding provides governments with an opportunity to support a wider reform of the food system. As highlighted in a recent report by the Food System Economics Commission, our food systems are at the heart of some of the greatest challenges facing humanity. They deliver unhealthy diets through unsustainable production systems that fuel the climate crisis, while leaving millions of smallholder farmers in poverty. Among the abundant wealth and production channelled through food markets, millions of citizens around the world – notably smallholder farmers – are left hungry and impoverished. Unhealthy diets are fuelling a global epidemic of overweight and obesity. Unsustainable and carbon-intensive agriculture is

wreaking environmental havoc and pushing the world towards climate catastrophe. Regearing food systems to healthy and sustainably sourced diets that are aligned with human well-being and the ecological boundaries of the Earth represent an existential challenge for policy-makers. School meals can help governments navigate this challenge.

This report sets out how well-designed and properly financed school meal programmes can support transformative change. The potential benefits in many areas are well established. School feeding programmes have a proven track record in improving nutrition, increasing school enrolment, and increasing learning outcomes, especially among children who have been left behind. They can also play a wider role in supporting the reform of the food system. School feeding provides a vehicle for delivering children with a healthy meal, potentially cutting the transmission lines from childhood overweight to adult obesity. The procurement of these meals can create a market for small-holder agriculture, supporting rural livelihoods, creating incentives for sustainable agriculture, and providing children with access to biofortified foods. Of course, school feeding is not a standalone intervention. But it offers a powerful mechanism to reconnect food systems with the goal of strengthening human well-being and planetary sustainability.

The political momentum needed to support a ‘big push’ on school feeding is already building. Governments in many of the poorest countries in the world are implementing ambitious plans to scale up school meals, often in the face of acute budget constraints. More than 100 countries and regional bodies are members of the School Meals Coalition, which is committed to building

‘a world where every child has an opportunity to enjoy a healthy and nutritious meal in school by

2030.’ That world is achievable – if governments and the international community act with a sense of urgency and collective purpose. This report sets out the case for a drive to expand the reach of school feeding programmes in low-income countries (LICs) and lower middle-income countries (LMICs). We provide two scenarios for this expansion and associated cost estimates for delivery.

The potential benefits of school feeding can be derived from the levels of deprivation experienced by children. LICs and LMICs now account for almost 90% of global undernutrition and an even higher share of \$2.15/day extreme poverty. Children are on the front line of these deficits and the SDG shortfall behind them. While children under 18 years of age account for approximately one-third of the world’s population, they make up half of the population living in extreme poverty – and that share is increasing. School meals are not a standalone solution to childhood hunger, but they provide a cost-effective vehicle for reaching millions in the critical preprimary, primary, and lower secondary years, roughly corresponding to the 5- to 14-year age group. We estimate that:

- 186 million of these children live in households that survive on less than \$2.15/day, with more than twice that number living under \$3.65/day. Approximately three-quarters of children in LICs and just under half in LMICs live below the higher threshold.
- 143 million children are undernourished, 28% of those in LICs, and 13% of those in LMICs.
- 400 million live with moderate or severe food insecurity, including 68% of children in LICs and 39% in LMICs.

Poverty and hunger permeate all aspects of the lives of affected children, including education. Real impacts can never be captured by statistics.

Hunger is the face of a child unable to sleep at night, living with deep anxiety and unable to concentrate in the classroom. The ‘learning poverty’ that leaves around 70% of people unable to read basic texts by the 10th birthday is a close cousin of monetary poverty and hunger.

School feeding is part of the toolkit to break the transmission lines that connect poverty and hunger to educational disadvantage. In poorer households, a school meal can tip the balance in parental decisions over whether to send children to school, especially girls. Based on analysis of poverty incidence and poverty gap data, we estimate the average value of per pupil budgets allocated to school meals in LICs and LMICs for a household with 2-3 children in school and at 10-16% on average for LICs and LMICs and at 12-18% for sub-Saharan Africa. School meal transfers create incentives for sending children to school and can allow poor households to keep them at school during difficult times.

The benefits of school feeding can be tracked across a broad spectrum of indicators. They include increased enrolment, reduced dropout rates, and improved learning. Providing school meals can increase enrolment by 10% or more in a low-enrolment setting. More time at school and the better concentration that comes with a nutritious meal can improve learning, and the poorest children make the greatest gains. Ghana’s school feeding programme allowed poor children to gain the equivalent of almost two years of additional schooling. School feeding also markedly improves nutrition – and not just for the immediate beneficiaries. Remarkable evidence from India’s midday meal programme shows that children of mothers who had participated were less likely to be stunted, school meals contributing to 13% to 32% of national height gains for age, a measure of stunting.

Many countries are already using school meal programmes to advance larger reforms of the food system. Procurement practices are geared towards local agriculture and farm practices compatible with sustainable development. In Brazil, 30% of school meals procurement are reserved for small farmers, supporting larger programmes to reduce rural poverty. Municipalities around the world are actively using school meal procurement to promote low-carbon and organic farming practices. Increasingly, though still inadequately and unevenly, school feeding is being integrated into larger strategies for healthy diets, providing children with some protection from marketing practices geared towards unhealthy diets. The architect of Finland’s school meal programme captured the potential: ‘If we were to change our national diet, it was critical that this started in schools.’ New opportunities are emerging to provide children with biofortified foods that represent a proven and cost-effective response to undernutrition.

The multiple benefits of school feeding are widely underestimated, in part because of a compartmentalised approach to public policy. Focusing on short-term cost-effectiveness in any one area (say, nutrition or learning) understates the aggregate benefits of school feeding across many areas (for example, learning and nutrition and food security). Furthermore, taking school feeding to the national level creates the cumulative benefits that build over the lifetimes of children and generates powerful multiplier effects.

Current coverage in LICs and LMICs is far too limited and too much of what counts as ‘coverage’ is poor quality, linked to underfinancing. In 2021, in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, only 19% of children in primary schools in LICs and 39% in LMICs – 157 million in total – received some form of

school feeding. However, what is delivered through school meals varies enormously. Millions of children tagged as ‘covered’ for reporting purposes do not receive a quality meal consistently throughout the school year. Although any school meal is obviously better than no school meal, especially for children living with hunger, poor quality provision greatly undermines the potential benefits.

Low coverage levels point to a vast untapped potential to reach children facing high levels of deprivation. We identify a group of countries with high levels of deprivation indicated by monetary poverty and stunting (both $\geq 20\%$) and low coverage for school feeding ($\leq 30\%$). We estimate that for the primary school age group only:

- 126 million children in high-poverty countries do not have access to school meals.
- 165 million children do not have access to school meals – two-thirds of them in countries with very high levels of stunting ($\geq 35\%$).
- Around 80 million children lack access to school meals in low coverage countries with high levels of both poverty and stunting.

These figures understate the levels of need, but the connection from expanded school feeding to reduced deprivation is not automatic. There are many millions of children living in countries with higher average coverage levels, but where school meals bypass the poorest children either because they are out of school or because they are in schools which are not covered. The effectiveness of school meals in reaching the most deprived children depends critically on ensuring that these children are in school and that the school they attend is reached by government programmes. Waiting for trickle-down effects to reach the poorest children and communities is both inefficient (because this is where the greatest results can be achieved) and inequitable

(because it leaves the poor behind). We advocate for approaches based on ‘progressive universalism’ or placing the most disadvantaged first in line, an approach consistent with the SDG principle of seeking to ensure that progress is faster for those farthest from the goals.

We develop scenarios for the scale-up of school feeding programmes. Scenarios do not provide blueprints, but can illustrate possible outcomes. Focusing on the age group of five to 14, we estimate that the in-school population of LICs and LMICs will increase by 67 million by 2030 through demographic change and increased enrolment. We include provision for one year of preschool, which is critical to reaching children who have experienced chronic malnutrition in their early years. We also include lower secondary schooling, which can reduce the risk of dropping out among adolescent girls. Two core scenarios are provided, each of which would mark a big step towards universal school meals.

- Scenario 1: A high ambition agenda. School meal coverage in LICs and LMICs reaches 60% by 2030 for pre-primary and primary school children, and 10% coverage in lower secondary. An additional 236 million children will be covered by school feeding programmes in 2030, 90 million of them in LICs.
- Scenario 2: Accelerated progress with convergence of LICs and LMICs. School meal coverage in LICs doubles from 2021 levels by 2030, catching up with LMICs, where coverage increases by 1% a year. The number of children covered increases by 162 million.

Estimating the cost of our scenarios is not straightforward. There is a lack of comparable cross-country evidence on the full cost of school meal programmes. This is an area where new research on the full cost of providing good

quality school meals is urgently needed. In the absence of comparable cross-country data we draw on inflation-adjusted cost-estimates from an earlier study. While recognising that there are significant margins of error, we apply an average benchmark cost for school meal provision of \$64 per pupil annually for LICs and LMICs. Based on this benchmark, average annual costs over a five year period would be \$3.6 billion (Scenario 1) and \$2.7 billion (Scenario 2). These figures include the supplementary costs of raising average reported budget allocations for existing programs to the \$64 per pupil benchmark level.

Although the headline costs are modest when expressed as a share of national income, the governments of the LICs and LMICs will be unable to cover them solely from domestic budgets. The additional cost of financing the high-ambition scenario in LICs – around \$1.1 billion – represents around three times the 2021 budget allocation (without aid). For LMICs, the \$2.5 billion annually required represents 60% of the 2021 budget allocation. Faced with a huge squeeze on funding linked to a slowdown in growth, unsustainable external debt, high borrowing costs, and inflation, governments across LICs and LMICs are already struggling to maintain spending in key areas such as health, education, and economic infrastructure.

Cost-sharing between national governments and the wider international community will be critical. Our scenarios do not provide cost-sharing formulae, but a rule-of-thumb approach can illustrate some rough parameters. Currently, international aid accounts for around half of school meal budget allocations in LICs and an average 25% in LMICs. Applying those ratios to the additional costs suggests that around \$1.2 billion in new and additional aid will be needed (\$550 million for LICs and \$700 million for LMICs). Ensuring that

domestic budgets assume responsibility for a growing share of overall spending will reduce the risk of dependence on aid.

Despite the limited fiscal space, governments in LICs and LMICs could consider a range of options to finance expanded school feeding programmes. Mobilising more revenue is a priority given the low tax-to-GDP ratios in many countries. Redirecting general subsidies, which are often inefficient and inequitable, to targeted school feeding investments could increase revenues. Many economists are highly critical of earmarked taxes. However, several countries finance large-scale school feeding programmes either fully (Bolivia and Guatemala) or partly (India) out of taxes assigned for spending on school meals. Sugar-sweetened beverage taxes could provide a financing link from the source of a ‘public bad’, to the public good of healthy school meals. Colombia’s recently introduced ‘junk food tax’ on highly processed foods provides a model that could be considered more widely as a source of school meal financing.

A summary of the avenues with the potential to mobilise new and additional resources include the following:

- increasing **general revenues** through more efficient and equitable taxation, including the closure of tax exemptions benefiting high income groups;
- **earmarked taxation** linking the financing of school meal programmes to revenue streams from oil, gas and minerals, building on the model provided by Bolivia;
- **taxing ‘public bads’** to finance the public good of healthy diets through school meals, using taxes on sugar-intensive beverages – and considering adoption of the ‘junk food’ tax introduced by Colombia’;

- redirecting **general subsidies** to more targeted support for school meals in areas with high levels of deprivation; and
- integrating school feeding into strategies for food system reform and climate adaptation to unlock sources of **climate finance**.

International cooperation is woefully inadequate given the potential benefits of school feeding for the SDGs. The official development assistance (ODA) reported for school meals is approximately \$287 million, – 0.1% of international aid. Moreover, aid flows are dominated by only one donor: the United States accounts for more than two-thirds of the total. Other G7 donors, including France, Japan and the United Kingdom, make limited contributions. The World Bank, the largest single source of development finance for LICs and LMICs, has average annual investments of around \$22 million. The current 21st replenishment of the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank concessional finance facility, provides an opportunity to change this picture.

There is an urgent need for more flexible and innovative approaches to international cooperation. International development financing for school meals suffers from fundamental failures. Aid is underfinanced, fragmented, and dominated by transfers linked to the preferences of individual donors, rather than the needs and strategic opportunities presented by recipient countries. Innovative finance in the form of debt relief, bond issues, and international levies is limited. International advocacy for school meals has had limited impact. There are lessons to be drawn from the experience of global health funds. In particular, the use of pooled (and non-earmarked) resources to achieve collective goals through support for national programmes, with allocations determined through strong technical assessments and cost-sharing formulae provides

a model that could be deployed to support school feeding. Global health funds have also provided mechanisms to mobilise innovative funds, a conduit for philanthropic support, and through their replenishment exercises a focal point for national and international advocacy.

Unsustainable debt servicing is a barrier to school meal financing that could be lowered. Debt repayments are eroding public spending in vital social sectors in LICs and LMICs. For example, the \$87 billion scheduled in payments for 2023 exceeds spending on health and nutrition. Many governments are meeting their obligations to external creditors, particularly commercial creditors, by defaulting on their obligations to children. Debt rescheduling and (where necessary) reduction would create an enabling environment for converting unpayable debts into investment in people, including through school feeding. Debt swaps, through which creditors waive claims related to government spending commitments in agreed areas, could also contribute to school meal finance. The most recent large-scale debt swap arrangements have targeted marine conservation goals. It is difficult to see the ethical or economic case against expanding the approach to alleviating hunger among children.

Innovative international financing could play a role in supporting a global action plan for school meals. The difficulties in moving from conceptualisation to implementation in innovative finance are well known. But there are promising examples. Unitaid, the multilateral health initiative, is funded through a global airline tax initiated by France in 2006. In a report prepared for the Brazilian presidency of the G20, Gabriel Zucman has set out the case for a global billionaire tax (Zucman, 2024). Set at 2% of billionaire wealth, the tax would raise up to \$250 billion annually. For context, the international aid required to finance a global plan

of action to reach another 236 million children represents just 0.4% of that amount. The billionaire tax proposal is a reminder of the vast disparities in wealth that define today's world and the potential to achieve transformative change through limited transfers. In the context of school meal financing, there are strong grounds for considering a global junk food tax modelled on Colombian legislation, with part of the revenue allocated to national school meal strategies in LICs and LMICs.

Without strengthened international support, even the strongest national plans will fall far short of their potential. We summarise some of the most immediate opportunities:

- Donors could commit to **increase aid for school feeding** to around \$1.5 billion annually to support national plans through finance and technical support.
- The **World Bank**, as the largest source of development finance for LICs and LMICs, could attach more weight to school feeding in the replenishment and delivery of IDA 21, providing at least \$300 million annually.
- Innovative financing through the **International Financing Facility for Education** (IFFEd) could leverage multilateral development finance for school meals by providing risk guarantees.
- Financing through WFP, the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait could be increased to boost school meal programmes in **humanitarian contexts**.
- **Debt relief** could be accompanied by the inclusion of school meals in large-scale debt swap operations, with child nutrition through school meals placed on a par with the resource mobilisation achieved through 'debt-for-ocean' swaps in Ecuador and other countries.
- School meals could be integrated into the project portfolios of climate finance institutions, such as the **Green Climate Fund**.

The Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty created under Brazil's presidency of the G20 provides a platform to support a large push for school feeding. The Alliance aims to provide a link between national-owned plans to accelerate progress toward the SDG goals of poverty eradication and zero hunger. School feeding provides a tremendous opportunity for the Alliance to deliver results. LIC and LMIC governments could be invited to develop plans for more ambitious school meal programmes, establishing budget commitments and delivery mechanisms. Donors could decide to support these plans by increasing their aid and technical support. Much of the delivery architecture is already in place, and the School Meals Coalition provides a ready-made network for cooperation.

A major global push on school feeding would deliver transformative change. For millions of children living with hunger and poverty, it would deliver hope and unlock opportunities for education. For an international community that is fighting a losing battle for the SDGs, it would demonstrate that change is possible and that multilateral cooperation can deliver results. As governments around the world grapple with the daunting challenges posed by food systems that are failing people and the planet, school meals procurement is part of the toolkit to promote healthy diets, strengthen rural livelihoods, and support sustainable agriculture. This report has focused on the financing needed to implement an ambitious global plan of action that would mark a great step toward universal school meals in the world's poorest countries. Backed by international cooperation, the costs are affordable. The cost of inaction is likely to be much higher.

Please follow the link [here](#) to read the full report.