

Advocacy messaging pager

School Meals and Nutrition

Investing in nutrition during the first 8,000 days of life is one of the most impactful ways to improve health, education and economic development. School meal programmes serve as a proven, cost-effective intervention to ensure that children receive the nutrition they need to thrive—creating lifelong benefits for individuals, families, and societies.

Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days: A Critical Window of Opportunity

- The first 1,000 days of life (from conception to age two years) are widely recognized as a crucial period for maternal health, foetal development, and infant growth.
- However, good nutrition during the “next 7,000 days” (from age 2-21 years) is also vital for maintaining early gains, for catching up, and for laying the foundation for a good education and a long, healthy, productive life.
- These years determine long-term health, cognitive development, and economic potential: all the components of creating human capital.
- Key developmental phases:
 - Intrauterine foetal development
 - Infants and early childhood (0-5 years): critical period for optimal nutrition to support growth and brain development
 - Primary age (5-9 years): A period where lifelong dietary habits, preferences, and attitudes are first established
 - Adolescence (10-19 years): A second critical window including puberty and brain rewiring where nutrition influences both physical and mental development

School Meals as a Key Strategy for Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days and Advancing Multiple SDGs

- The closure of schools worldwide at the start of the COVID pandemic had terrible consequences for education but also showed countries worldwide how important schools are for supporting the wellbeing of children.
- At least [466 million pre-primary, primary and secondary schoolchildren](#) are receiving school meals based on information available from 174 countries.
- The global school meals industry has an annual expenditure of [around \\$84 billion USD](#), 99% of which is funded domestically by governments themselves.
- This provides an enormous opportunity to create significant change at scale—with school meals being the largest source of food which is under public policy control, and which governments can use to directly influence the dietary preferences and intake of children and adolescents during the crucial “next 7,000 days” window
- School meals contribute to achieving multiple SDGs, including poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), supporting girls and women (SDG 5), economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), responsible consumption and production (SDG12), climate action (SDG 13) and strengthened partnerships (SDG 17).



The Lifelong Health Benefits of Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days

- The world is off track in achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), with [undernourishment persisting](#).
- School meals are well documented in their potential to reduce micro-nutrient deficiencies and anaemia prevalence. For example, reducing anaemia [by 20% among girls](#) in Northern Uganda.
- Meanwhile, overweight and obesity are also [rising rapidly worldwide](#), resulting in an increase in diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases.
- Early exposure to healthy diets helps establish lifelong eating habits that can prevent diet-related illnesses. Research suggests that healthier school meals could [prevent up to 3 million cases](#) of NCDs globally.
- School meal programmes offer significant [intergenerational health benefits](#), particularly for adolescent girls, by enhancing their nutrition, education, and delaying early marriage and pregnancies—all of which increase the chances of healthy, safe reproduction.

The Educational Impacts of Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days

- Despite vast investments in education, learning and attainment rates [are stagnant or even regressing](#) in some countries, a trend which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Annually, [around \\$4.7 trillion USD](#) is spent on education worldwide (cumulative across governments, households, and donors), yet less than 2% of that amount is spent by health and nutrition services on the wellbeing of schoolchildren.
- Children learn better when they are nourished: School health and nutrition programmes [have been demonstrated](#) to improve enrollment, attendance, cognitive development, and attainment.
- Investments in school meals therefore leverage existing investments in education.

The Social Welfare Advantages of Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days

- School meals support families, offsetting [8%-16%](#) of household income per child fed at school and reducing financial barriers to education.
- A well-managed school lunch programme can also provide a key opportunity to bring children together over food, with the potential to promote positive behaviors and [bring children together regardless of their backgrounds](#).

The Agricultural and Economic Value of Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days



- Home-grown school feeding models, in which food is sourced directly from local smallholder farmers, can create a stable and predictable demand for local produce, thereby increasing farmers' incomes and promoting agricultural development.
 - **Brazil:** Feeds 40 million children daily from nationally produced food, 30% of which is sourced from family farms local to the school.
 - **Ecuador:** Passed the National Integral School Feeding Law, ensuring school meals are a national priority and supporting local agriculture.
 - **Kenya:** Uses indigenous, highly nutritious crops from smallholder farmers, increasing dietary diversity and local economic benefits.
 - **Rwanda:** Shifted to fortified whole maize flour, providing five times more nutrients at the same cost.
- School meal programmes create [over 1,500 direct jobs in food preparation per 100,000 children fed](#), mainly benefiting women-led businesses.

The Planetary Health Impacts of Promoting Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days

- Global food systems account for one third of all greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to extreme weather shocks, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity.
- School meals programmes make up 70% of the global public food system, meaning that changes to consumption and production practices within school meals programmes can have significant impact on planetary health.
- Shifting to diverse, nutrient-dense, planet-friendly foods with low environmental impact [can cut school meals carbon emissions](#) by 26-43%.
- Schoolchildren are agents of change: by reaching them at a crucial age when dietary preferences are still forming, school meals programmes that can shape the future eating habits of a generation towards planet-friendly choices.
- In the long-term, this can create demand from the agriculture sector for healthy foods sourced from environmentally sustainable local farm systems, over time promoting regenerative farming methods, biodiversity, resilience against extreme weather shocks, and economic growth.

Why does this matter? The Additive Economic Returns from Investing in Good Nutrition in the Next 7,000 Days

- School meals are highly cost-effective, [generating a return](#) of between \$7 USD and \$35 USD for every \$1 USD invested.
- This is because they accumulate returns across multiple sectors, including health, education, social protection, and agriculture.



- Continued investment in the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents throughout the “next 7,000 days” maximizes their potential, creating the conditions for them to flourish into healthy, productive members of society—ultimately both increasing a nation’s human capital and reducing [expensive health burdens](#) over the long-term.