

Transforming food systems through planet-friendly school meals

Launched at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, the School Meals Coalition has grown into a dynamic multilateral platform of over 110 governments - representing over 65% of the global population-, alongside six regional bodies and over 150 partners. In just four years, member countries have delivered remarkable progress, making it one of the most concrete and catalytic initiatives driving progress toward sustainable food systems.

School meal programmes are now increasingly nationally-led, financed, and integrated into policies and development strategies, signalling strong government ownership and long-term commitment. Governments are stepping up: they are investing more resources, expanding coverage, and scaling up programmes to reach more children with nutritious, locally-sourced meals. Some of the world's poorest nations are leading the way, making bold, strategic choices to prioritize school meals, recognizing their critical role in child well-being and national development.

The Coalition is a rare example of thriving multilateralism. Coalition members and partners are collaborating across borders and sectors to share knowledge, align actions, and mobilize resources. They demonstrate what's possible when the global community unites around a common goal.

This brief provides Coalition members and partners with key messages, facts and figures, examples of government leadership around how school meals can help to transform food systems.

SCHOOL MEALS AS CROSS-SECTORAL SOLUTION

School Meals, Agriculture and Food Systems

- School meal programmes buy more food than any other public initiative, accounting for [70%](#) of all publicly managed food systems globally. This creates a unique opportunity for advancing food system transformation, improving procurement, shortening local supply chains, and shaping how food is produced, processed, stored, and consumed at scale.
- Home-grown school feeding creates stable markets by ensuring a reliable demand for smallholder farmers, increasing incomes and creating jobs. By sourcing food from local farmers, these programmes can strengthen domestic economies and empower women, youth, and groups, such as [Indigenous Peoples](#).
- Moreover, home-grown school meals, if well-designed, can effectively align demand- and supply-side policy levers to drive food systems transformation. On the supply side, they promote practices that improve soil health, enhance farm resilience, increase yields, and support biodiversity and ecosystem services. On the demand side, they encourage a shift in consumer preferences toward healthier, more planet-friendly diets, which helps reduce food waste and shorten supply chains.

- School meal programmes that prioritize local procurement strengthen local and regional food systems by boosting the incomes of smallholder farmers and promoting sustainable agriculture practices.

Country leadership examples:

Ethiopia increased their government budget for school meals from US\$45 million in 2022 to US\$84 million in 2024 and achieved a 4 -fold expansions of their school meal programme during that time. It procures much of its food for school meals from smallholder farmers, stimulating the economy at the community level and incentivizing diverse and increased agricultural production, providing a structured, reliable demand. School meals are considered a strategic lever for food systems transformation. The national menu guidelines alongside ones at the subnational level like Addis Ababa's School Feeding Menu Booklet emphasize local sourcing and a home-grown approach. In the 2022/2023 Academic year, it is estimated that around US\$50 million was transferred directly to smallholder farmers through school meal procurement. For instance, the school meal programme of the city purchases approximately 12,000 tonnes of teff annually, accounting for roughly 12% of the city's entire teff market (SFI HGSF Report, 2025). Not only do such programmes nourish children, but they also support smallholder livelihoods, stimulate rural economies and strengthen food systems.

Burundi's HGSF programmes increased local procurement to over [40%](#) of food purchases in 2022. The farmer cooperatives engaged in the programme indicate gains of [29–42%](#) and, in some cases, a doubling of cooperative revenues. In addition, an impact evaluation found that of the [12](#) cooperatives supplying to schools, 9 reported that all their revenue came from sales to the schools.

Malawi links school meal programmes to local procurement that are benefiting nearly 34,000 farmers across 28 districts, reaching approximately 1,675,000 children in 1,481 primary schools.

Nepal provides home-grown school meal programmes has linked over [1,000 women farmers](#) in Siraha and Saptari districts with community schools to supply fresh vegetables to local schools.

Sierra Leone promotes their National School Feeding Policy that outlines a multi-sectoral approach involving the Ministries of Education, Agriculture, and Health, ensuring that school meals are part of a broader food systems transformation strategy.

School Meals, Environment and Food Systems: Focus on Diet Diversity

- Small changes to school meal programmes can enhance sustainability efforts and bolster nutrition; for example, shifting school meals from refined grain flour to fortified whole grain flour can make school meals much more nutritious, at no additional cost to schools. Across a range of macro and micronutrients, fortified whole grain maize flour is [five times](#) more nutritious than refined flour. [A survey](#)¹ conducted in low- and middle-income countries indicates that local purchases resulted in the inclusion of more diverse and fresher foods in school meal menus.
- School meals and nutrition education can therefore directly influence the next generation's relationship with food, support in building healthier habits and help transform global food systems to become more [planet-friendly](#).

¹ As per the GCNF Global Survey Report 2024.

- [The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition](#), an Initiative of the Coalition, plays a key role in demonstrating how school meals intersect with food systems and planet-friendly approaches. Its flagship “Planet-Friendly School Meals” report—presented at COP28 and informing COP29 - shows how school meal programmes can transform food systems by promoting sustainable agriculture, reducing environmental impact, and supporting biodiversity, while also improving child nutrition and education. This work highlights school meals as a scalable, cost-effective strategy for achieving both planetary health and human development goals.

Country leadership examples:

Ecuador passed the [National Integral School Feeding Law](#) ensuring school meals are a national priority and supporting local agriculture.

France has committed to ensuring that [at least 50%](#) of food served in school meals comes from sustainable and high-quality sources, with at least 20% being organic.

Lebanon has committed to [developing a new methodology](#) within the framework of the school health programme, to include school meals with other complementary health and environmental activities, including clean water.

School Meals, Food Systems and Economic Development

- School meal programmes represent [70%](#) of all publicly managed food, making up a global market of [around US\\$ 84 billion](#) annually.
- School meal programmes are not an expense—they are a high-impact investment with high economic returns and contribute towards multiple sectors like education, health, social protection and agriculture. For every US\$1 invested, they generate between US\$7 and US\$35 in economic [benefits](#).
- School meal programmes are estimated to have created approximately 7,4 million direct jobs globally, which equates to [1,591 jobs for every 100,000 children reached](#). The majority of these jobs are related to the preparation of food, benefitting local cooks and small catering companies, most of them led by women.
- School meals help bring children to school and make them stay. More years of schooling translate into and result in the growth of a skilled workforce that can break intergenerational cycles of poverty, helping to spur national development.

Country leadership examples:

Cambodia: [Women farmers and small business entrepreneurs](#) are key partners as government strives to deliver locally sourced, fresh foods to schools. By supporting local farmers and businesses, the programme is economically empowering women, boosting the local economy, and enhancing systems for local procurement. This partnership with local farmers also facilitates a crucial shift away from reliance on food imports. The Government is prioritising sourcing from local smallholder farmers, with a goal of procuring 70% of food locally to create stable markets, boost rural incomes, and strengthen community resilience. Women are at the heart of this effort, making up 75% of smallholder farmers, 74% of suppliers, and 66% of cooks engaged in the programme, (SFI HGSF Report, 2025).

Central African Republic committed to increasing coverage from [10% to 30% by 2027](#), to reach an additional 230,000 children. The government will also implement a local food procurement strategy by 2024 and integrate it into their 2024- 2028 National Development Plan.

Guatemala mandates that at [least 70%](#) of ingredients for its school meal baskets be procured from local smallholder farmers which has been effective since 2017. This commitment to local sourcing not only ensures nutritious meals for students but also supports the livelihoods of farmers and promotes sustainable food systems.

Haiti: In only 10 years, Haiti has scaled up local sourcing for school meals from just 1% in 2015 to [70% today](#)—already exceeding the [government's national commitment](#) to reach 50% by 2026.

Kenya committed to scaling up the national programme to achieve universal coverage by 2030, [expanding from 2.6 million in 2024 to 10 million children](#), in a planet-friendly way which promotes smallholder farmers' economic inclusion.

School Meals, Food Systems and Support to Families

- School meals provide essential support to families. Feeding one child at school can offset [8%–16%](#) of a household's income in Rwanda, Benin, Senegal, and Bangladesh, easing the financial strain on parents and [incentivizing](#) them to send children to school.
- Depending on programme design, school meals can generate jobs across the value chain, from farm to fork, with women being the ones who benefit the most. Most frontline staff – cooks, caterers, and cafeteria workers – are women who prepare, serve, and clean up after meals. [44%](#) of programmes reported that they maintained a focus on creating jobs for women, [25%](#) reported a focus on youth employment.
 - Supporting local farmers is vital, as they produce around [35%](#) of the world's food and aid in long-term sustainable development. Home-grown school meal programmes support local agriculture by sourcing from smallholder farmers and stabilizing markets with long-term contracts for consistent incomes, higher productivity, and better food quality.
 - Many governments employ these programmes to [empower women](#) engaged in agriculture by promoting their participation in the school meal procurement process.
 - Women are at the forefront of the transformation of local food systems and in the promotion of planet-friendly approaches to school meal programmes. For instance, in Brazil, [women](#) have been leading movements advocating for the incorporation of planet-friendly or agroecological foods in school meal programmes.

Country leadership examples:

Brazil commits to further increasing family farmers' participation in the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) by raising the minimum percentage of financial resources allocated to family farming purchases in the national programme above the current [30% quota](#).

Lesotho has mandated sourcing [80% of food commodities](#) from local smallholder farmers, emphasizing planet-friendly farming practices, food safety, nutrition, and health.

School Meals Investment and Sustainable Finance

- Increasingly, governments are recognizing school meals as long-term national investments and increasing domestic spending on these initiatives. Up to 99% of school meal programme costs

are covered by national government budgets. In the last four years, global investments in school meals nearly doubled, from US\$ 43 billion in 2020 to US\$ 84 billion in 2024.

- Countries have shown the way forward in terms of options to strengthen and scale [financing](#) for their school meal programmes. These include using natural resources and tax revenue, SDG bonds, debt swaps, and earmarked taxes. Opportunities to scale external funding also exist through innovative financing mechanisms such as guarantee-based instruments and engaging philanthropy.
- Cross-sectoral planning and credible [budgeting](#) for school feeding are crucial to facilitating sustainable partnerships between governments and external funders, helping countries transition towards self-reliance. [The School Meals Coalition](#), launched at the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021 under Finland and France's leadership, is transforming school meal programmes into a mechanism for advancing and improving food and education systems. Today, it represents over 110 Member States, six regional bodies, and around 150 partners to ensure every child has access to nutritious meals. The Coalition is supported by four [initiatives](#) focused on research, data and monitoring, urban programme support, and innovative financing for governments.
- [The Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition](#) (SFI) is one of the initiatives of the School Meals Coalition led by the Learning Generation Initiative (LGI) at the Education Development Centre (EDC). It works with governments and donors to unlock long-term financing for school meal programmes. Through research, direct country support, and advocacy, SFI helps countries identify and scale multi-year financing solutions, with a particular focus on low- and lower-middle-income countries.

Country leadership examples:

Ethiopia: Government investment in school increased by almost seven times: from USD 11.7 million in 2020 to USD 84 million in 2024, with an even higher allocation of almost USD 110 million for 2025. The country has established a dedicated national budget line and signalling a strong fiscal commitment to scale-up. A significant portion of this funding comes from local governments, reflecting decentralized leadership and ownership.

Burundi committed to gradually increasing the annual national budget dedicated to school meals through the Finance Act to achieve [50% coverage in 2027 and 100% by 2032](#).

Honduras: [National commitments](#) include reforms to the legal and institutional frameworks which are currently underway, aiming to fully embed the programme into food and nutrition security systems. Key investments include water, clean energy, and school gardens, placing schools at the centre of climate-smart, inclusive infrastructure development. The country advocates for solidarity-based debt swaps and is actively exploring innovative financing through multilateral and bilateral partners to close equity gaps and avoid unsustainable debt.

Indonesia launched the Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (Free Nutritious Meal Program) in January 2025, aiming to reach [78 million schoolchildren by 2029](#). This is reinforced by the Inclusion of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and smallholder farmers into school meals procurement and delivery through Indonesia's 80,000 "Red and White Cooperatives" and 30,000 central kitchens.

Rwanda committed to sustaining the annual budget allocated to [the national school feeding programme](#).

Sri Lanka has committed to [70% local sourcing target by 2025](#) to scale up home-grown school programme, strengthen food systems and reduce reliance on imports.

Ukraine: In 2024, Ukraine hosted the [European Regional School Meals Summit](#), showcasing its leadership in advancing school meals and children's wellbeing. That same year, President Zelenskyy introduced free meals for all children in grades 1–4 and instructed the government to extend free meals to all schoolchildren by 2025.