

Advocacy messaging brief

School Meals in Fragile and Emergency Contexts: From early response to recovery

October 2026

SUMMARY

In times of crisis driven by conflict, climate-related pressures or economic shocks, the very fabric of communities is torn apart. Social cohesion fractures, food systems weaken, and public services struggle under the weight of instability. These shocks disproportionately affect people in vulnerable situations, particularly children, increasing their exposure to harm, exploitation and malnutrition, and jeopardizing their wellbeing and long-term development.

Education is often among the first services to [collapse](#) in emergencies and the last to recover. More than [520 million children](#) - over one in five globally - are living in conflict-affected settings. An estimated [234 million](#) living in crises contexts experience disrupted education. Half of them are girls who face heightened barriers to accessing learning. When vulnerabilities intersect - such as being a girl, being displaced or living with a disability – children's exposure to harm grows even more acute.

Hunger deepens these risks. [Conflict](#) is the largest driver of food insecurity. In fragile and emergency settings, children routinely arrive at school hungry, if they even arrive at all. Malnutrition is one of the strongest [barriers](#) to children's ability to maintain learning continuity: children struggle to concentrate, attendance drops, and the risk of dropout and exposure to harm rises. Yet, when [protected](#) and functional, schools can remain one of the few accessible multisectoral platforms.

This is where school meals become uniquely relevant. School meals sit at the intersection of education, health and nutrition, child protection and social cohesion – sectors that are all under strain in crises. In emergency contexts, providing meals in schools increases [attendance](#), supports cognitive development, improves health, anchors children in a sense of normalcy, while protecting them from multiple risks.

By integrating school meals into broader multisectoral systems, governments and partners can help ensure continuity of learning and nutrition even amid instability. Investing in school meals protects human capital, supports recovery and strengthens community resilience.

This advocacy messaging brief, developed by the School Meals Coalition Secretariat, highlights the transformative role of school meals in fragile and conflict-affected settings, including contexts where climate and economic related pressures heighten instability, displacement or food insecurity. It outlines key messages and findings to support

Coalition members and partners in their advocacy, speaking engagements and global fora, calling for sustained investment, cross-sector collaboration, and stronger policy action to protect children's futures.

WHY SCHOOL MEALS BELONG IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND EARLY RECOVERY

Drawing on robust [evidence](#) from across sectors and countries, a nutritious school meal is an effective way to keep children nourished, learning and protected, underscoring it as a fundamental component of emergency response, early recovery frameworks, and national development planning.

School meals represent a strategic, flexible, and multi-sectoral investment, serving as an essential public infrastructure while supporting economic recovery. In emergency response and early recovery interventions, school meals can be a stabilizing force across various sectors, with benefit [streams](#) similar to those found in developmental settings:

- School meals combined with health and nutrition interventions within the settings of [education in emergencies](#), serve as powerful platforms for change. [School health and nutrition interventions](#) can provide opportunities to deliver water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) activities and sexual and reproductive health information, among others, while [school meals](#) help reduce child food insecurity and improve dietary diversity.
- School meal programmes serve as an [anchor](#) for communities under stress and a lifeline for children. In addition to combating short-term hunger, they can safeguard children's [learning](#), support local economies through effective procurement and food systems, support social protection, and address mental health.
- School meals can foster [social cohesion](#) by maintaining daily routines and restoring a sense of hope. They [play a meaningful role](#) in supporting reconstruction efforts and strengthening community bonds. School meals can also contribute to human capital development and [lay the foundation](#) for long-term peace.
- When funded by domestic resources as part of the Government's safety net, school meal programmes aim to contribute to sustainable, long-term support systems that can respond to unexpected shocks and build confidence in government institutions over time.
- School meals, as part of a broader humanitarian-development-peace nexus, offer a scalable intervention to deliver inclusive services, reduce inequalities, and build social cohesion.

HOW TO SUSTAIN AND SCALE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMMES IN EMERGENCIES

- **Reinforce domestic commitment to ensure continuity despite potential funding volatility.** In crisis-affected and low-income settings, external aid remains essential but can be unpredictable. Prioritizing school meals within national policies and progressively increasing domestic allocations can help build more resilient programmes, while continuing to work hand in hand with international partners. For example, despite ongoing conflict, Ukraine's decision to [increase its budget for school meals in 2024](#) illustrates how national commitment, supported by external partners when required and feasible, can sustain programmes in times of shock.
- **Bolster supply chains by leveraging local procurement.** Instability often disrupts supply chains, exacerbating market volatility and limiting the feasibility of delivering school meals programmes. While homegrown school feeding (HGSF) can help stabilize supply chains by creating predictable markets for smallholder and family

farmers, it is not always viable in all emergency contexts and must be pursued with careful market and security assessments. Where conditions allow, local procurement can bolster dietary diversity and support rural economies. Haiti, for example, is moving towards an operational model that prioritizes locally sourced purchases to ensure consistent food service while strengthening the local economy.

- **Build shock-responsive, food-system-linked programmes.** Successful emergency school meals require adaptable delivery models that function across crisis, recovery, and resilience phases. [Countries such as Sudan](#) and Syria have adjusted modalities to maintain continuity during conflict. Home-grown school feeding systems, as used in [Kenya and Ethiopia](#), further enhance resilience by anchoring programmes in local food systems that can scale even during shocks.
- **Strengthen political commitment and embed school meals in national systems.** Where school meals lack strong political ownership and institutional frameworks, programmes become fragmented, underfunded, and prone to collapse once humanitarian funding cycles end. Integrating school meals into national policies and systems helps ensure continuity and stability. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, the newly launched [Strategy for Education in Emergencies](#) integrates school meals as part of a holistic, systemwide approach to protect learners and sustain education during crises.

CROSS SECTORIAL BENEFITS AND COUNTRY EXAMPLES

School meals sit at the intersection of multiple systems, allowing them to serve as a powerful bridge between sectors. Some examples include:

Education

- In a [recent study](#), almost 66% of refugee households surveyed reported that their children are disinterested in attending school when hungry, while 71% reported were unable to concentrate in school due to hunger.
 - In conflict-affected [Yemen](#), WFP school meals help keep children in school, while providing essential daily [nutrition](#) in a context of widespread food insecurity.
 - In [Sudan](#), where nearly 25 million people face acute food insecurity, resuming home-grown school meals in March 2024 through take-home rations reached 42,685 students across five states, helping address hunger while boosting school attendance, especially for girls.
- School meal programmes can aid the recovery of education systems by [incentivizing school attendance](#), and keeping children in school.
 - In [Chad and Niger](#), girls residing in conflict areas face significant barriers to education. Yet, school meals, cash incentives, and hygiene support boosted girls' enrolment and attendance, with evaluations confirming school meals as a key driver of improved access to education.
- Lack of access to learning undermines children's development and hinders their transition from learning to earning, exacerbating already high youth unemployment and opportunity loss, reflecting the severe reality of learning poverty in fragility, conflict and violence settings.
 - WFP's emergency school meals programme in [South Sudan](#) assists more than 377,000 children in conflict zones, encouraging school attendance and going back to classroom.
- [Education](#) can bridge the gap and promote the competencies needed to build a more peaceful world and plays a vital role in fostering resilience among those affected by war and conflict.
 - School meals programmes in [Lebanon](#), for example, are perceived to be associated with improved social cohesion and instilling equality between children attending school.

Health (physical and psychological) and nutrition

- [Economic](#) instability impacts availability and access to healthy food, which directly affects children's nutrition. [Nutrition and health outcomes](#) strengthen each other: better nutrient intake supports immunity, energy and learning.
 - In Afghanistan, instability and economic collapse have pushed over [17 million people](#) into acute food insecurity. In 2024, WFP provided school meals to [1.3 million children](#) across eight provinces facing a combination of low enrolment and attendance, high gender gaps, food insecurity and malnutrition.
 - School meals are also an enabling platform for health interventions, such as deworming, vaccinations, hygiene promotion, child growth monitoring, and more, in addition to nutrition. In DRC, a quarter of the population faces crisis levels of hunger, with limited access to food, health services, and education. School meals ensure that over 39,000 students, received reliable daily meals in [the 2023/2024 academic year](#), providing essential nutrition and other services while enabling children to stay in school.
- School meals support humanitarian response by alleviating short-term hunger and helping protect children's physical and mental wellbeing during crises.
 - Evidence from [Syria, Lebanon, DRC and Niger](#) shows that school meals can reduce immediate hunger, improve children's ability to concentrate and participate in class, and provide a predictable daily routine that strengthens both nutrition and psychosocial wellbeing. When delivered in safe and accessible learning spaces, school meals can also encourage parents to send their children to school, supporting attendance and helping schools remain open, or reopen, after conflict.

Social cohesion and peacebuilding

- In [emergencies](#), when safe and accessible, school meal programmes have the potential of safeguarding children from risks such as child labour, early marriage, unsafe migration, or recruitment into armed groups, by keeping children engaged in school and providing them with structure and routine.
 - Findings from [Niger](#) and [Chad](#) show that girls benefitting from school health and nutrition interventions, including school meals, desired to attend school for longer and get married later than the average educational attainment and age of marriage. Parents also reported high aspirations for their daughters' education.
- A [framing paper](#) co-authored by WFP and the Institute of Development Studies underline the role of school meals in fragile and conflict-affected settings in enhancing contributions to social cohesion, when grounded in conflict sensitivity. School meals strengthen trust between parents, communities and institutions, and help rebuild a sense of hope for children.
 - In [Lebanon](#), school meals helped restore fairness and a sense of normalcy for children returning to learning after conflict, providing all students with the same nutritious meal and establishing a predictable daily routine that nurtures belonging within the school community.
 - In [Mali](#), school meals helped stabilize daily routines in communities affected by displacement and insecurity, offering children a safe place, predictable structure, and a shared activity that strengthens social cohesion.
 - In [Colombia](#), because schools were widely seen as safe and neutral spaces, they became a key platform for promoting inclusion: creative activities, community dialogue, and nutrition-focused engagement helped shift attitudes and practices around diversity and social cohesion, demonstrating how school meals and school environments together can foster positive relationships across divided communities.
 - In [Somalia](#), school meals provide children with a sense of normality, stability and hope, support school attendance and retention, reduce risks associated with dropout and negative coping mechanisms, and foster positive interactions among children from different backgrounds.