School Meals Coalition

Advocacy messaging brief

School Meals as Climate-Smart Investments: Scaling National Impact

November 2026

This messaging brief provides key messages, evidence, data and country examples to support advocacy efforts by School Meals Coalition members and partners on the role of school meals in advancing climate, food systems and sustainable development goals. School meal programmes are nationally owned, evidence-based investments that deliver co-benefits across nutrition, resilience, local economies and sustainable food systems. Achieving greater impact requires coordinated policy, financing and partnership actions to scale national school meal programmes and maximise their contribution to climate and development goals.

WHY POSITION SCHOOL MEALS AS A CLIMATE-SMART INVESTMENT?

The latest edition of WFP's State of School Feeding Worldwide report reveals that school meal programmes reach at least 466 million children globally, an increase of at least 80 million children since 2020. They are recognized as nationally owned policy levers, with governments providing 99 percent of financing.

School meals programmes deliver multiple dividends: improved child health and learning, stronger local economies and more sustainable food systems. When designed as home-grown school feeding programmes, they also become a lever for climate action. Home-grown school feeding strengthens local food systems, promotes regenerative practices, generates jobs for family and smallholder farmers, Small and Medium Enterprises in supply chains and youth, and aligns public procurement with national climate and development goals. School kitchens become an entry point for clean, efficient cooking solutions, which reduce emissions, protect the environment from deforestation and land degradation, improve health and make food preparation safer and more sustainable.

By including school meals in the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty policy basket, countries position school meals as a tool for sustainable resilience and equity, aiming to reach an additional 150 million children with school meal programmes by 2030 in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. This global commitment reinforces the case for school meals as a climate-smart investment that advances food security, nutrition, resilience and sustainable development.

Building on the UN Deputy-Secretary General, Amina Mohammed's remarks at the UN Food Systems Summit+4 in 2025 to "move school meals from a climate blind spot to a climate solution", key actors are already responding, urging all countries to embed regenerative, home-grown school meals into their national climate plans, biodiversity strategies and related financing plans. This call to action underscores the growing recognition of school meals, if well-designed, as a climate intervention, one that nourishes children, bolsters rural livelihoods and regenerates the planet.

Coalition members and partners have a collective opportunity to:

- Position school meals as a nationally owned, ready-to-scale solution for adaptation and resilience. With over 466 million children already reached and an increasing allocation from domestic budgets, members can show how programmes are delivering resilience today and how they can be anchored in climate-focused, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans.
- Demonstrate linkages with sustainable food systems. The State of School Feeding report highlights how school meals can align demand-side measures (nutritious, sustainable menus, predictable public procurement standards and nutrition guidelines) with supply-side outcomes (stimulating sustainable local production, expanding local markets and generating jobs in farming, preparation and supply chains).
- Elevate national leadership and commitment. Several Coalition member governments, especially in Africa where 20 million more children have been reached in the last two years, can position their progress as a compelling example of what ambitious leadership and investment can achieve.
- Emphasize the return on investment. School meal programmes deliver up to US$7 – US$35 in returns for every US$1 invested, making them one of the most cost-effective strategies for advancing education, health, nutrition, local economies, and promoting climate resilience through sustainable agri-food systems including diversified and local food supply chains, and healthy diets that benefit both people and planet.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation through coordinated efforts across education, agriculture, health, social protection, energy and environmental sectors.

SCHOOL MEALS AS CLIMATE-SMART INVESTMENT

- With 99 percent of financing for school meals now coming from national budgets, governments are treating school meals as a strategic investment in human capital, resilience and food systems transformation.
- Beyond school meals, these programmes can be a significant source of employment,– from smallholder farmers to caterers, transporters and cooks - generating linkages that strengthen local economies. Many local food systems jobs are held by women and low-income communities, making school meals a powerful lever for economic empowerment, youth employment and inclusive growth.
- For every US$ 1 invested, school meal programmes have the power to generate US$ 7 to US$ 35 in returns across education, health, social protection and agriculture. Few public investments offer such wide-ranging cross-sectoral dividends.
- School meals represent an untapped investment opportunity in climate finance. Numerous national school meal programmes already contribute to climate action by reducing emissions through clean cooking solutions, shortening supply chains, reducing food waste and supporting more diverse, locally sourced and sustainable food systems. Well-designed school meals programmes deliver multi-sectoral benefits, including climate gains. Despite delivering benefits across climate, nutrition, education, health and local economic development, school meals remain largely overlooked by climate finance. Between 2018-2021, only 0.005% ($ 5.5 million per year) of total climate-related development finance was directed to school meals.

- School meal programmes present a strong opportunity to demonstrate clear climate benefits and elevate national leadership. For example, Burundi and Malawi have included school meals in their NDCs and call on governments and funders to channel greater climate financing toward these high impact, nationally owned programmes, transforming a long-standing climate blind spot into investments for climate action.

Country Examples:

- **Italy and Egypt's** US$ 22 million debt swap (2003 – 2022) supported over 93,000 students and their families with fortified date bars and conditional food rations, respectively, boosting attendance especially among girls.
- **Germany's** multi-phase debt swap (2013 – extended until at least June 2027) with Egypt, in partnership with WFP, targets the delivery of nutritious school meals, upgraded school infrastructure and piloted integrated rural development. This initiative improved education, livelihoods and resilience through training, microfinance, and youth-focused opportunities.
- Since 2017, **Guatemala** has committed to revitalizing the local economy by sourcing 70 percent of school food from family farmers. A mobile application developed by the Ministry of Education and WFP connects over 500 farmers to 840 schools, streamlining the procurement process, promoting transparency and ensuring that fresh products reach students in an efficient manner. This has helped bridge the gap between smallholder agriculture and schools, fostering sustainable development and food security.
- **Brazil** leverages school meals as a policy tool to link nutrition, education, family farming and sustainable food systems. Through its National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), Brazil is strengthening local procurement by mandating at least 45% of federal school meal resources to be sourced from family farmers, with priority for Indigenous peoples, Quilombola communities and women producers. At the same time, it is improving the nutritional quality of school meals by prioritizing fresh and minimally processed foods and limiting ultra-processed products. These measures contribute to more climate-resilient food systems by supporting sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, local livelihoods and healthier diets.
- **Bangladesh** has a deliberate focus on creating leadership and income-generating opportunities for women, and a position within each School Management Committee (SMC) was designated to empower women in decision-making.
- School meal programmes of **Croatia and San Marino** focused on creating job opportunities for individuals with disabilities within their school feeding initiatives, effectively promoting social inclusion through employment.
- **Syria**'s school meal programmes aimed to support women by offering job opportunities in sandwich preparation and by providing training to enhance qualifications, alongside opportunities for youth in food distribution.

TRANSFORMING GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS

- Global food systems account for one third of all greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to extreme weather shocks, biodiversity loss and food insecurity.
- School meals are a proven climate-smart investment that strengthens local food systems. By sourcing food locally and shortening supply chains, school meal programmes reduce the carbon

footprint associated with transport and storage and empower local smallholder farmers, including rural women. In doing so, they help build more inclusive and adaptive food systems.

- School meal programmes make up 70% of the global public food system, meaning that changes to consumption and production practices within school meals programmes can have a significant impact on planetary wellbeing.
- When designed as home-grown school feeding programmes, school meals create predictable demand for local farmers. This demand can be directed toward agroecological and regenerative practices that restore soil health, protect biodiversity and reduce emissions, ensuring children's meals also build longer-term resilience in farming communities.

Country examples:

- **Cambodia** is prioritizing 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 (Sustainable Financing Initiative Homegrown School Feeding Report, 2025).

SHAPING FUTURE EATING HABITS

- Shifting to diverse, nutrient-dense, planet-friendly foods with low environmental impact can cut school meals' carbon emissions by 26-43%.
- By reaching young schoolchildren at a crucial age when dietary preferences are still forming, school meals programmes can shape a generation's future eating habits toward planet-friendly choices. In the long-term, this can create demand in 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.

Government examples:

- **Kenya** embeds planet-friendly practices by using local, drought-tolerant crops, clean cooking solutions and smallholder sourcing to cut emissions and strengthen local food systems. The expansion of Kenya's school meal programmes involves shifting from carbon-heavy food imports to locally grown drought-tolerant crops and vegetables and moving toward cleaner cooking methods. In doing so, Kenya aims to transform its food systems, reduce its carbon footprint and support its clean energy transition.
- **Armenia** funds 180 school meal days annually, with national nutrition guidelines and growing links to local producers for sustainable food systems.
- **Finland**: Universal school meals include weekly vegetarian days, organic milk and local fish.
- Policies promote low-carbon procurement and student involvement in menu planning.

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND POLICY MOMENTUM

- The number of countries with a dedicated school meals policy has nearly doubled from 56 in 2020 to 107 in 2024. The 2024 State of School Feeding worldwide report shed light on the school meals policy basket, which shows how governments are institutionalizing programmes across

sustainable financing, nutrition standards and procurement systems to monitoring and accountability mechanisms. This policy momentum demonstrates that school meals are becoming a sustainable feature of national systems.

Country examples:

- **Brazil** serves over 40 million children.https://publications.wfp.org/2024/state-of-school-feeding/chapters This is underpinned by agroecology principles and a legislative framework that requires at least 45% of federal school meal resources to be sourced from family farmers and a minimum of 85% of food procurement resources must be allocated to fresh or minimally processed foods, while processed and ultra-processed foods are limited to a maximum of 10%.
- **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.
- **Peru** is a strong example of how national school meals policy is being used to strengthen climate-related and disaster preparedness commitments. The government has developed protocols to ensure continuity of school meals during emergencies, targeting high-risk regions, training school administrators, and linking delivery to a financial activation plan - showing how school meals can support broader resilience and emergency response efforts.

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND ANTICIPATORY ACTION

Extreme weather events drive food insecurity and intersect with conflict and economic shocks, creating cascading humanitarian risks. School meals offer a forward-looking solution by ensuring nutrition and stability during crises, especially when integrated into anticipatory action and climate-smart systems.

Country examples:

- In **Bangladesh** pioneered anticipatory action linked to school meals in flood-prone regions. Ahead of predictable monsoon flood, early warning systems are used to trigger pre-positioned food supplies and cash transfers to ensure continuity of school feeding. This approach helps maintain nutrition and education access during climate shocks, while reducing negative coping strategies among vulnerable families.
- In **Niger**, school meals are integrated into seasonal anticipatory action frameworks to address drought-related food insecurity, using climate forecasts and vulnerability mapping to deliver early interventions, including school-based feeding and nutrition support. These programmes help stabilize household food access and reduce long-term vulnerability.
- The **Ethiopian** government has integrated school meals into its Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), which is designed to reduce vulnerability to climate shocks like drought. In drought-prone regions, school meals are used to stabilize food access and keep children in school during lean seasons. This approach supports both humanitarian response and long-term resilience by linking school feeding to early warning systems and seasonal risk forecasts.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLEAN ENERGY INTEGRATION

- School kitchens are also an entry point for clean cooking solutions – reducing emissions, protecting forests and health and creating safer, more efficient environments for the millions of women and men who prepare school meals daily.

Country Examples:

- **Tanzania** commits to transition 80% of its population to clean cooking by 2033, accelerating the timeline for public institutions serving over 100 people. At COP28, President Samia Suluhu Hassan launched the African Women in Clean Cooking Support Programme, reinforcing commitment to gender-responsive energy solutions. Supporting these national goals, WFP and Sustainable Energy for All piloted Electric Pressure Cookers in 50 public primary schools across four regions, while exploring carbon revenues as a co-financing mechanism to scale clean cooking adoption.
- **Rwanda** has embedded clean cooking into its national school feeding strategy. Following the rapid scale-up of its programme to reach over 4.4 million children, Rwanda launched a dedicated strategy in 2024 that links school meals to climate adaptation, cost-efficiency and improved learning - demonstrating how integrated approaches can deliver results at scale.

Notes:

About the School Meals Coalition

The School Meals Coalition is a network of governments and partners committed to school meals. It drives actions to urgently improve and scale up school meal programmes to ensure that every child can receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030.

In just five years, the Coalition has emerged as one of the most successful multisectoral initiatives in recent times. From 46 governments in 2021 to 113 governments today, it has reinforced a growing global commitment and catalyzed government leadership on one common goal: ensuring that every child receives a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030. Governments are supported by a growing ecosystem of 6 regional bodies and more than 160 partner organizations. For more information, visit: http://schoolmealscoalition.org

About research on planet-friendly school meals

The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition supports governments in identifying and scaling cost-effective school meals solutions, drawing on a global body of evidence generated through its Global Academy of 1,300+ experts across 124 countries. Through its forthcoming Planetary Health Toolkit, the Consortium is helping countries assess the costs and environmental benefits of adapting menus and cooking methods to improve both health and sustainability outcomes. Read a recent article from Research Consortium experts on Planet-friendly school meals as opportunities to improve children's health and leverage change in food systems.

About funding strategies for sustainable school meals implementation

The Coalition's Sustainable Financing Initiative plays a pivotal role in helping governments develop long-term, resilient funding strategies for national school meal programmes. By supporting the creation of financing plans, conducting value-for-money analyses, and engaging development banks and international financial institutions, the initiative strengthens countries' capacity to invest in school meals as a strategic tool for human development. Importantly, it also contributes to promoting planet-friendly school meals - including sustainable agriculture, clean cooking solutions, and food waste reduction. See their recent report: Home-Grown School Feeding: Case Studies on Procurement and Financing | School Meals Coalition