

School Lunch Programmes for Progress¹

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If well planned, coordinated and implemented, a government funded school feeding programme for all primary school children can be progressively transformative. Such a programme, involving government departments and agencies working together, can benefit schoolchildren, their families, farmers and public health, now and in the future.

Such a scheme should comprehensively supply adequate food for all, especially schoolchildren, and improve their nutrition, thus overcoming hunger and malnutrition besides improving the children's physical and mental development, and school learning, attendance, participation and performance.



School meals, well planned by nutritionists and dieticians familiar with local food practices and alternatives, using safe food grown by family farmers free of toxic agrochemicals, and hygienically prepared, will significantly improve the nutrition, health and wellbeing of the children.

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3-pronged approach

A comprehensive and ambitious three-pronged approach to school feeding would go a long way to address contemporary malnutrition, of both micronutrient deficiencies of minerals and vitamins as well as overweight, obesity and other diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Nutrition education for schoolchildren must promote an adequate, balanced and comprehensive understanding of health and nutrition. Teachers and the media will need to effectively share better knowledge of nutrition, health and wellbeing, and related food behaviours, dietary lifestyles and healthy living.

The programme should enable children to learn, from an early age, about food, its production, safety, preparation, consumption and effects on the human body. Menus served can be rotated every two to four weeks to enhance dietary variety. Strict implementation and enforcement can help ensure that only healthy food is available in schools.

Learning from relevant experiences everywhere, good implementation and appropriate enforcement can also inculcate values of responsibility, equity, concern, empathy, cooperation and hygiene.

Nutritious school meal programme

A nutritious school feeding programme — properly designed and supervised by well-informed nutritionists and dietitians to meet school children's micronutrient (vitamins and minerals) needs, and 25-30% of their macronutrient needs, such as carbohydrates and proteins — can go a long way.

The programme should meet much of the children's dietary needs besides promoting knowledge of health and nutrition as well as healthy food habits. Menu planning should be aligned with the country's dietary guidelines and international best practices for healthier school meals.

Meal requirements should adopt minimum standards, as stipulated in the country's Recommended Nutrient Intake (RNI) or Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA), but modified to increase consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and to set minimum and maximum calorie intake levels.

Programme success is often partly due to active parental involvement, especially to ensure school food hygiene, safety and quality.

Children in such programmes generally have significantly better scores for both cognitive and physical development. Participating students significantly reduced their body mass indices (BMIs) even if they snacked outside school.

Agrarian transformation

The procurement policy for the school feeding programme offers a unique opportunity for agrarian transformation. Food procurement for the programme can be used to induce

farmers to safely produce more nutritious and healthy food, especially vegetables and fruits.

With the promotion of international trade and export orientation, not many farmers produce food, typically staples, often due to subsidies from governments, aid programmes and sometimes consumers. Many of those growing cereals often remain among the poorest farmers as they cannot compete with industrially produced cereals, often imported from abroad.

Instead of large transnational companies, family or 'homestead' farmers should be the main source of food procured for school meal programmes. With sufficient, appropriate agricultural research and extension, the programme can not only provide safe, non-toxic and nutritious food for children, but also increase farmer incomes.

If well designed and implemented, it can strengthen or revive farmer cooperatives and organizations to better serve the farmers' and the nation's needs as locally grown food supplies can be more easily regulated to ensure safe and healthy food supplies.

In many countries, from Brazil to China, the quality, safety and nutrition of food supplies on local markets have improved as farmers produce more than necessary to meet procurement contract requirements for school meal programmes.

Scheme implementation

Three types of school feeding programmes have different implications and consequences:

1. Universal programmes in which all schoolchildren get free meals without conditions or requirements.
2. Targeted programmes in which only selected children to qualify for free meals, such as those from destitute families, or severely undernourished children, due to stunting and wasting, although qualification requirements are often abused.
3. Local programmes in which all children in a designated area receive free meals, e.g., rural areas, poor urban areas, post-disaster zones, et al.

The experiences of Japan and other societies show that only universal programmes can achieve all the objectives of such initiatives. Unlike targeting, the universal approach reduces the shame associated with receiving free meals, encouraging more children to participate with dignity.

Most middle-income countries and some low-income countries can well afford such universal programmes, which benefit countries in several significant ways, if well designed and implemented with broad popular participation, including both parents and farmers.

Further readings:

- World Food Programme - [School feeding](#), website.
- FAO, [School Food and Nutrition](#), website.

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Opinion: [Address Malnutrition, Not Just Food Security](#), by Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Wan Manan Muda and Tan Zhai Gen, 2019.
- [The triple burden of malnutrition is getting heavier in the world, says UNICEF](#), 2019.
- [Facts and figures on world malnutrition](#), 2019.
- [Second principle: Food for the undernourished](#), Seven principles for ending hunger, 2013.
- [Food security: definition and drivers](#), 2013.