

Executive Summary

This review was undertaken jointly by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Bank Group, building on the comparative advantages of both organizations. The overall objective is to provide guidance on how to develop and implement effective school feeding programs, in the context of both a productive safety net, as part of the response to the social shocks of the current global crises, as well as a fiscally sustainable investment in human capital as part of long-term global efforts to achieve Education for All and provide social protection for the poor.

The analysis was initiated in response to enhanced demand for school feeding programs from low-income countries affected by the social shocks of the current global crises, and focused first on the role of school feeding as a social safety net. This proved to be too narrow a context, and the analyses evolved to address the longer-term implications for social protection and the development of human capital as part of national policy.

This shift in emphasis came about because the available data suggest that today, perhaps for the first time in history, every country for which we have information is seeking to provide food, in some way and at some scale, to its schoolchildren. The coverage is most complete in the rich and middle-income countries—indeed, it seems that most countries that can afford to provide food for their schoolchildren do so. But where the need

is greatest—in terms of hunger, poverty, and poor social indicators—the programs tend to be the smallest, though usually targeted to the most food-insecure regions. These programs are also those most reliant on external support, and nearly all are supported by WFP.

So the key issue today is not whether countries will implement school feeding programs, but how and with what objective. The near universality of school feeding provides important opportunities for WFP, the World Bank, and other development partners to assist governments in rolling out productive safety nets as part of the response to the current global crises, and also to sow the seeds for school feeding programs to grow into fiscally sustainable investments in human capital.

The Benefits of School Feeding Programs

School feeding programs provide an explicit or implicit transfer to households of the value of the food distributed. The programs are relatively easy to scale up in a crisis and can provide a benefit per household of more than 10 percent of household expenditures, even more in the case of take-home rations. In many contexts, well-designed school feeding programs can be targeted moderately accurately, though rarely so effectively as the most progressive of cash transfers. In the poorest countries, where school enrollment is low, school feeding may not reach the poorest people, but in these settings alternative safety net options are often quite limited, and geographically targeted expansion of school feeding may still provide the best option for rapid scale-up of safety nets. Targeted take-home rations may provide somewhat more progressive outcomes. Further research is required to assess the longer-term relative merits of school feeding versus other social safety net instruments in these situations.

There is evidence that school feeding programs increase school attendance, cognition, and educational achievement, particularly if supported by complementary actions such as deworming and micronutrient fortification or supplementation. In many cases the programs have a strong gender dimension, especially where they target girls' education, and may also be used to benefit specifically the poorest and most vulnerable children. What is less clear is the relative scale of the benefit with the different school feeding modalities, and there is a notable lack of engagement of educators on research around these issues.

The clear education benefits of the programs are a strong justification for the education sector to own and implement the programs, while these same education outcomes contribute to the incentive compatibility of the

programs for social protection. Policy analysis also shows that the effectiveness and sustainability of school feeding programs is dependent upon embedding the programs within education sector policy. Hence, the value of school feeding as a safety net and the motivation of the education sector to implement the programs are both enhanced by the extent to which there are education benefits.

Well-designed school feeding programs, which include micronutrient fortification and deworming, can provide nutritional benefits and should complement and not compete with nutrition programs for younger children, which remain a clear priority for targeting malnutrition overall.

The Sustainability of School Feeding Programs

The concept of a school feeding “exit strategy” has tended to confound thinking about the longer-term future of school feeding programs. Here we show that countries do not seek to exit from providing food to their schoolchildren, but rather to transition from externally supported projects to national programs. For 28 countries previously assisted by WFP, this has already happened, and here we begin to review case studies of how externally assisted programs transition into sustainable national programs, which in some cases have themselves gone on to provide technical support to others (for example, Brazil, Chile, and India).

This review highlights three main findings. First, school feeding programs in low-income countries exhibit large variation in cost, with concomitant opportunities for cost containment. Second, as countries get richer, school feeding costs become a much smaller proportion of the investment in education. For example, in Zambia the cost of school feeding is about 50 percent of annual per capita costs for primary education; in Ireland it is only 10 percent. Further analysis is required to define these relationships, but supporting countries to maintain an investment in school feeding through this transition may emerge as a key role for development partners. Third, the main preconditions for the transition to sustainable national programs are mainstreaming school feeding in national policies and plans, especially education sector plans; identifying national sources of financing; and expanding national implementation capacity. Mainstreaming a development policy for school feeding into national education sector plans offers the added advantage of aligning support for school feeding with the processes already established to harmonize development partner support for the Education for All-Fast Track Initiative.

A key message is the importance of both designing long-term sustainability into programs from their inception and of revisiting programs as they evolve. Countries benefit from having a clear understanding of the duration of donor assistance, a systematic strategy to strengthen institutional capacity, and a concrete plan for the transition to national ownership with time frames and milestones for the process.

Trade-Offs in the Design of School Feeding Programs

The effectiveness of school feeding programs is dependent upon several factors, including the selection of modality (in-school meals, fortified biscuits, take-home rations, or some combination of these); the effectiveness of targeting; and the associated costs.

Take-home rations (average per capita cost US\$50 per year) can be more finely targeted and can give high-value transfers, but have significant administrative costs. They have strong safety net potential and appear to result in increases in attendance, and perhaps educational achievement, on a similar scale to in-school meal programs. Thus, from a social protection point of view they may be preferred to in-school meal programs.

In-school meals (average per capita cost US\$40 per year) tend to be less finely targeted and capped in the value of their transfer, have potentially large opportunity costs for education, and incur higher administrative costs, but have the potential not only to increase attendance but to act more directly on learning, especially if fortified and combined with deworming. In-school snacks and biscuits (average per capita cost US\$13 per year) have lower administrative costs but also lower transfer and incentive value, though the scale of benefit relative to meals needs to be better quantified.

Designing effective programs that meet their objectives requires an evidence base that allows careful trade-offs among targeting approaches, feeding modalities, and costs. There is a particular need for better data on the cost-effectiveness of the available approaches and modalities. There are very few studies that compare in-school feeding with take-home rations in similar settings, and the few that have gone further with this suggest that both programs lead to similar improvements over having no program at all.

The key issue is that in selecting any modality, there are important trade-offs dependent upon context, benefit, and cost. In some contexts,

for example, school feeding programs combine on-site meals with an extra incentive from take-home rations targeting a specific group of vulnerable children, such as those affected by HIV or girls in higher grades.

Institutional and Procurement Arrangements

The appropriate approach to implementing school feeding programs will vary depending on the program objectives; the context, that is, whether the program is implemented in stable, conflict, or emergency situations; the capacity of the government at different levels to manage the program using its staff, infrastructure, and accountability systems; the type of resources available from local and external sources, whether cash or in-kind; and the presence of key implementing partners, especially those organizations specializing in school feeding programs.

Case studies of programs that have transitioned to national ownership show that effective programs have a designated national institution, usually the education sector, and well-developed capacity at the subnational levels. While national ownership appears to be a critical factor, many different approaches to implementation—including public sector, private sector, and public-private partnerships—appear to be effective.

The management of school feeding programs has become increasingly decentralized, mirroring the trend in the education sector toward school-based management. But the extent of involvement of teachers and education staff is an important issue because there are, for example, very significant opportunity costs of using teachers to prepare food.

The design of school feeding programs should specifically address the following significant issues and challenges: environmental concerns related to cooking fuel and disposal of commodity packaging; inappropriate use of school gardens for food production; and the potential opportunities for corrupt practices in procurement and contracting.

The roles and responsibilities of the institutional system depend largely on the procurement modality and sources of food: local procurement is the most common approach within national programs and is emerging as the more common approach overall. Local procurement is being actively evaluated as a means to achieve sustainable school feeding programs and, at the same time, to use the purchasing power of the program as a stimulus for the local agricultural economy. As such, local purchase of food for school feeding is seen as a force multiplier, benefiting children and the local economy at the same time.

Toolkits to Design and Update School Feeding Programs

An important conclusion of these analyses is that there is a need to improve the initial design of school feeding programs and, where necessary, to update existing programs. To support these processes, the book presents two new tools, one to facilitate the initial design of school feeding programs, and the other to help update existing programs. These checklists are complemented by an array of design and assessment tools.

This review also proposes a research agenda to fill in some important gaps in current knowledge, with the aim of creating a stronger evidence base for future decision making.

The Way Forward

The overall conclusion is that the global food, fuel, and financial crises and the refocusing of government efforts on school feeding that has followed, provide an important new opportunity to help children today and to revisit national policies and planning for long-term sustainability tomorrow. Taking full advantage of this opportunity will require a more systematic and policy-driven approach to school feeding by both governments and development partners.