

CHAPTER 11

Successes and Challenges

The Global Survey of School Meal Programs © sought to capture countries' successes and challenges around the topic of school feeding. Toward this end, survey respondents were asked to summarize the strengths of the programs operating in their countries, the challenges they face, any positive developments related to school feeding within the previous five years, and any setbacks experienced over the same time period.

Among the successes enumerated, respondents often highlighted their views as to the manner in which school meal programs are associated with increased student enrollment, retention, and school performance, as well as improved student health. Nepal and Benin (among other countries) reported that school feeding activities have contributed toward achieving gender parity in primary education and reducing socio-cultural discrimination, and Chad said that school feeding is used to combat the practice of early marriage for girls. Wherever school feeding activities had recently expanded, as in Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Saint Lucia (among other countries), this development was viewed as a success.

Respondents celebrated school meal programs for raising awareness of healthy diets and building appreciation for locally produced foods.



Respondents also celebrated the inclusion of a wider diversity of food items on the school menu in Hungary, Portugal, and Uruguay. School meal programs are described as raising awareness of healthy diets and, especially among home-grown school feeding programs, increasing appreciation for the consumption of locally produced foods. Guatemala, in particular, noted the cultural relevance of its school feeding program. Burundi had recently introduced farm-sourced dairy products to schools; South Africa ushered in sardines; and Palau replaced canned products with frozen or fresh meats.

Local procurement of food items, as in home-grown school feeding programs, were reported to increase the income of family farmers in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Timor Leste, and Zambia (among others). Another commonly cited success story was the support received from parents and the local community, whether in the form of monetary or in-kind contributions or other forms of engagement. Along these lines, Malawi noted that its school feeding programs are “community-owned” with the communities (parents) preparing meals for the students. School Feeding Committees in Colombia also serve as vehicles for community engagement and citizen participation.

Several survey respondents mentioned complementary activities or services when asked about positive developments around school feeding. For example, Benin noted a pilot project of supplying water to primary schools by the Fire Brigade Group, and Zambia emphasized that students who received school meals also benefited from education on food safety, nutrition, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). In South Africa, the deworming program for primary school students is tied to school feeding operations.

Some countries, such as Bangladesh, Cameroon, eSwatini, Kenya, Mozambique, and Namibia, emphasized the support for school meal programs demonstrated by the national government. Several countries—including Benin, Cambodia, Namibia, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, among others—listed the recent passage of national legislation or other policies in support of school feeding programs. For example, Timor Leste noted that school feeding now has a separate line in the national budget. In Côte d’Ivoire, the institutional home for school feeding activities had recently been re-established in the Ministry of National Education following a period of civil strife in the country.

Some countries, such as Guinea-Bissau, emphasized the technical support offered by development partners as a positive development in school feeding. Public-private partnerships were also celebrated in Kazakhstan and Thailand. Côte d’Ivoire discussed the new Centre of Excellence against Hunger and Malnutrition in West and Central Africa that has been established in Abidjan. Countries that have hosted the Africa Day of School Feeding, including Côte d’Ivoire and Niger, noted this as a positive development, and program assessments through a Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER)

workshop were another common development regarded as a success.

Every country was able to list some successes and positive developments related to school feeding. Nevertheless, the challenges associated with school feeding were also abundant.

Inadequate and unpredictable budgets were identified as a challenge in many countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Niger, and Sao Tome and Principe. Unpredictable funding from local authorities and communities was reported as an obstacle in Cambodia, and the program budget in Timor Leste is contingent on the overall state of the national budget. In Zambia, where the World Food Program ended its support for the Home-Grown School Feeding program, the remaining government budget was deemed inadequate. Countries that lack a budget line for their school feeding programs (including Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Tajikistan) noted this as a problem.

Difficulties related to supply chains and logistics were also acknowledged in many countries. In Kenya, food losses occur in transit from food suppliers to the schools. The rainy season introduces challenges around school access in Benin, Nepal, and Sudan, while winter weather inhibits access to remote schools in Tajikistan. Niger and Cameroon reported that some parts of the country were difficult to access due to conflict and socio-political upheaval. Similarly, in Mali, security crises in the north and center of the country led to large population displacements that disrupted school feeding programs. In the Food for Education Program in Nepal, in-kind food donations arrived late, causing a five-month break in the provision of school meals in that school year.

Strained infrastructure and inadequate resources hindered the operation of school feeding programs, as well as their expansion to resource-poor areas. This pattern was noted in Guatemala and Zimbabwe. In Cambodia, insufficient infrastructure (e.g., kitchens, stoves, and eating halls) was reported as a challenge, and schools particularly lacked clean water during the dry season. Canteen facilities at most schools in Tajikistan were said to require renovation. In Kenya, poor storage facilities sometimes resulted in food spoilage, with food being condemned by public health officials.

Insufficient or inadequate human resources were cited as a challenge in countries such as Botswana, Brazil, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Frequent turnover was cited as a concern in Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau, where the continual “churn” of school feeding personnel resulted in inefficiencies and the allocation of scarce resources toward redundant training. Honduras reported that the school feeding program had difficulty retaining skilled, committed professionals, and a lack of personnel was attributed to low salaries in the Czech Republic.

Several countries noted weaknesses in their monitoring and evaluation systems, including Mozambique and Madagascar. Timor Leste reported that there is no system in place for regular monitoring, while in Honduras, there were inadequate staff for monitoring activities. The survey respondent from Guinea-Bissau identified a need to develop a database for gathering information about school meals. Sierra Leone noted that completing the survey was difficult due to a lack of data stemming from poor record-keeping (although this situation is expected to improve with a new school feeding secretariat).

Survey respondents were asked to comment on the existence and nature of mismanagement or corruption within school feeding programs. Mozambique noted concerns related to the procurement of items from suppliers who were not eligible for participation. There were issues such as weak oversight, mismanagement, inadequate security of food supplies, and diversion of food and funds reported by Burundi, Mali, Saint Lucia, South Africa, and Zambia (among other countries). In Honduras, the need to remove political influence from their school feeding program was recognized. Some success stories could also be found around the topic of mismanagement. Corruption levels were reported to have decreased in Gambia with the introduction of a code of conduct in school feeding, and in India, the introduction of a system of unique 12-digit identity numbers (Aadhaar) helped to reduce the number of “ghost students” (i.e., inflated student numbers).

Additional challenges, though less common, were also raised in the survey responses. Some countries, such as Ethiopia and Honduras cited the lack of a school feeding law or a similarly strong document to bolster the school feeding program. A lack of coordination in the management of school feeding programs was observed in Cambodia and Ethiopia; cumbersome bureaucratic processes were cited as a challenge in Panama; and school offices in Uruguay were weighed down by administrative burdens associated with managing the food services. Although community support was often cited as a strength of school meal programs, Benin and Cambodia identified the halfhearted commitment of some communities as a weakness of their programs. The United Arab Emirates cited parents displaying a lack of interest in food and nutrition, and in the United States, the need to improve children’s food choices and eating behaviors was characterized as a significant challenge. For a school meal program with individual-level targeting criteria, Cyprus cited the difficulty in identifying which children are in the most need. The vulnerability of school meal programs to natural disasters was lamented in Vietnam, Madagascar, and Nepal. Finally, the survey respondents from Malawi and Niger noted a growing concern related to environmental degradation (deforestation) stemming from the use of firewood for the preparation of school meals.



Respondents emphasized the need for more research on the impact of school feeding on students' health, school performance, and the local economy.



To understand how to best design and improve school meal programs, survey respondents listed their research needs, or the topics they would like to study or see examined by other analysts. Sometimes these were country-specific, with implications for the design of programs in one setting, and sometimes these touched on broad themes that would be globally relevant. The survey respondents in many countries emphasized the need for more research on the impact of school feeding on students' health and school performance, as well as the local economy. Nepal stated a need to better understand the impact of school meals, along with other nutrition interventions, on the prevalence of anemia in adolescent girls. In Portugal, research was encouraged regarding the enduring impacts of the school meal program on the future habits of beneficiaries. Several countries, including Benin and Liberia, cited a need to explore the impact of different management modalities (systems of food sourcing) on local agriculture.

More research was also requested on the cost and funding of school meal programs, as noted in Moldova and Liberia. In Niger, there was a request to examine the mobilization of the private sector to finance school canteens, while in Zambia, there was a desire to understand how school feeding could be profitable for private sector actors. South Africa similarly cited the need to identify a cost-effective delivery model. The feasibility of national coverage of school feeding merits examination in the Republic of the Congo, while Benin said the feasibility of a home-grown school feeding approach needs to be explored.

In addition, several countries expressed a desire to see nutritional assessments of their school meal menus, particularly when they feature local foods. In Sierra Leone, there was a specific request for dietary recommendations for meal planning, and in Laos, there was a similar request to study the eating habits and nutrition requirements of different age groups. In Liberia, there was a desire to understand the differences in nutritional content and availability of locally produced versus imported foods.