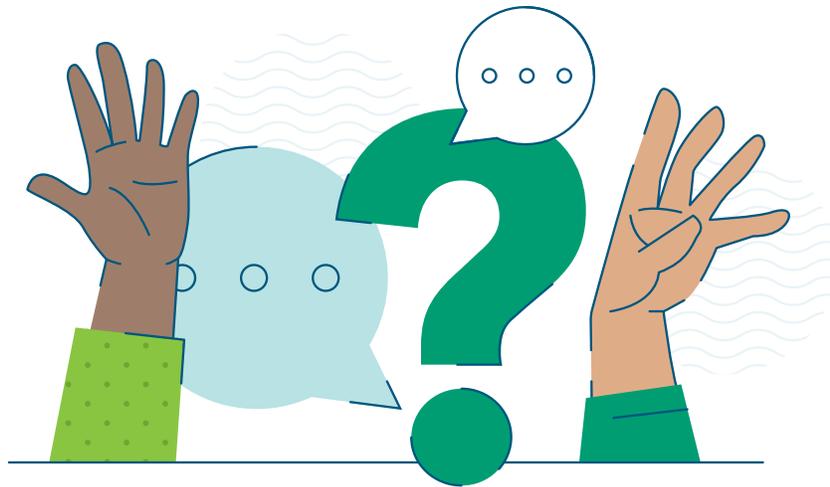


Conclusions, Discussion, and Questions for Further Study or Action

The Global Survey of School Meal Programs © provides a view of the “landscape” of school feeding from multiple angles. We have strived to ensure that the survey itself and the analysis in this report are non-judgmental in nature. In this section, though, we reflect on what the survey is telling us through a lens of current development evidence and good practice.

While the survey provides answers to some important questions, the picture it paints is at a fairly high level. Most topics beg for more in-depth examination – or even action – based on what we are seeing. We pose here a set of questions that seem relevant to us; however, we encourage readers to add their own questions that can be explored beyond what is in this report.



SOCIAL SAFETY NETS AND COVERAGE

School meal programs constitute a massive, popular, and important social safety net for vulnerable children and their families all around the world. Coverage is particularly strong for primary school-age children. The main coverage issue, underscored by data from this survey, is that coverage is weakest precisely where the need is greatest.

Nearly 60% of the low income countries surveyed reported that they served preschoolers, and the percentage increases with wealth to 85% in high income countries. This would seem to indicate increasing attention to the nutritional needs of preschoolers. Attention to this cohort has been lacking in the past, as large-scale maternal and infant nutrition programs focused on the first 1,000 days of a child's life, and school meal programs focused on primary schoolchildren, leaving a potentially harmful gap in coverage.



For further study or action:

Which low income countries are the “positive deviants” that have achieved high coverage rates? How have they done so? What lessons can be drawn that would be useful for other countries that aspire to reach more children?

What do we know about how preschool programs are implemented? Is the feeding of preschoolers directly linked to, or separate from, school feeding programs? How are preschool programs funded and managed? How is their short- and long-term impact measured?

GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT

A highlight of the survey results is the extent to which governments are investing human and financial resources in their school meal programs, even in the poorest countries. Financing remains a challenge in many countries, but it is clear that programs benefit most when funding is “ring-fenced,” earmarked specifically for school meal programs and listed separately as a line item in national budgets. In addition, the survey results show that there is need to strengthen laws, policies, and standards in many cases, and to improve the recruitment, training, and retention of program staff.



For further study or action:

Are governments harnessing economies of scale to achieve the greatest cost-effectiveness? For example, are they looking holistically at their food buying needs—for preschools, schools, jails, militaries, hospitals, and national food reserves—and purchasing power?

POLITICAL RESILIENCE

The survey results demonstrate the durability of school meal programs, once begun. Country after country cited start dates for their programs that go back decades, and there is a correlation between the longevity of the programs and their coverage rates. Specifically, another year of operation is found to be associated with an additional 0.27% of the school-age population receiving food through schools.



For further study or action:

Where has the scale-up of programs been most rapid, and what are the factors that made that possible?

MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION

School meal programs require coordination across sectors and at all levels, from the local farm and school levels up to the national and international levels. Countries are at different levels of experience, but all indicate some challenges. These include stresses due to centralized versus hybrid or de-centralized management systems; difficulties with inter-ministerial cooperation; varying degrees of success in public-private partnerships; poor record keeping and reporting; or struggles in attaining desired levels of community involvement. In 40% of the surveyed countries, another factor adding to management and coordination challenges is that they have two or more large-scale programs underway at the same time. The average is highest in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the South Asia, East Asia & Pacific region.



For further study or action:

Can stakeholders identify and promulgate the aspects of successful management and coordination that are good practices in the broadest sense, and isolate what contextual factors determine where practices need to be uniquely tailored to the specific situation?

Do multiple programs within the same country offer benefits that offset the management and coordination challenges? Is the phenomenon of having multiple programs linked to the receipt of foreign support for school feeding activities? Have countries successfully combined or consolidated programs or brought their multiple programs under one umbrella? What has been learned in the process that might be helpful to others with similar challenges?

NUTRITION AND HEALTH

The survey uncovered multiple points of interest regarding nutrition and health, and these are outlined by subtopic below.

Obesity

There is a disconnect between school feeding program objectives and the global obesity epidemic, despite the correlation between those countries that have the highest and lowest rates of obesity and their having and not having, respectively, program goals to address obesity.



For further study or action:

How can the prevention and mitigation of obesity be prioritized in school feeding programs globally? What lessons can be drawn from countries with the most experience in addressing obesity through their school meal programs? What interventions are most effective and scalable? Can the costs and benefits of obesity-mitigation and prevention activities linked to school meal programs be quantified?

Diversity of food basket

This survey has shown a clear link between local food purchase and the diversity of food items used in school meal programs. There are dramatic patterns related to countries' economic status and some of the food items provided (particularly green vegetables, meat, and dairy). The survey also reveals some patterns around the diversity of school food across geographic regions. Countries appear to prefer diversifying their school food baskets, though this is particularly challenging in food-insecure areas.



For further study or action:

Are local purchase programs taking full advantage of nutritious, indigenous, and locally available foods? Can local purchase for school meal programs drive investments in, and production of, more nutritious foods? Are more diverse, locally-sourced school food baskets cost-competitive with less diverse foods used in the programs? If not, what would it take to make them cost-competitive? How do advertising, social norms, costs, or other factors influence the desirability of nutritious and/or local and/or indigenous/traditional foods as compared with imported, processed, and fast-food options?

Fortification and biofortification

School meal programs are a somewhat underutilized channel for providing key micronutrients to children. Ideally, children would have access to all needed micronutrients via diversified diets; however, that is not an option in many environments, which makes school meal programs an attractive avenue for providing needed micronutrients to large numbers of children. Though a majority of programs reported using some fortified foods, almost a third did not; and very few reported using biofortified foods (understandably, as biofortification is a relatively new option that is not available everywhere).



For further study or action:

Are those responsible for the implementation of school meal programs knowledgeable about fortification and biofortification options and benefits? What kind of cross-sectoral collaboration is required if fortification programs are to be initiated or scaled up? Where are some fortification success stories, and what can be learned and shared from those experiences?

Complementary interventions

School meal programs pair well with complementary services and programs related to health and hygiene such as nutrition education, deworming treatments, and school gardens—particularly when they are required as national policy.



For further study or action:

What infrastructure conditions are most critical to these interventions? Are these activities achieving behavior change? Do interventions that are most important for girls receive the attention needed, and do they have the desired impact? Can best practices be replicated and scaled up? Are the costs and benefits quantified?

Food safety and quality

The survey asked few questions about food safety and quality practices, but responses indicate that these may be areas that deserve more attention. Just over half of the countries reported that they have food safety policies related to school feeding, and 81% of programs train cooks in food safety/hygiene. However, given that roughly one quarter of food purchasing decisions are managed at the regional or local level where inspection systems are likely to be the weakest and an apparent trend toward greater decentralization, food safety and quality are of concern.



For further study or action:

Are adequate systems and controls in place to ensure the safety and quality of school food in most countries? What are the minimum standards and controls needed to protect the safety of school food? What actions are needed to ensure they are in place?

GENDER

Gender issues are of great significance in the context of sustainable development. They are also complex to sort out. The survey asked a number of questions of relevance to gender, and to girls in particular. The key learnings and some new questions are highlighted below.

Data

Despite decades of effort, there is still a lack of data to monitor progress. Only half of the school meal programs reported gender-disaggregated numbers of students receiving food, with significant variation between countries of different income levels and different geographic regions. More disaggregated information was provided by low and lower middle income countries, and from programs in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Gender-disaggregated data were more often reported at the preschool and primary levels, dropping off at the secondary level.

Coverage

School feeding has a well-documented track record of improving school enrollment, attendance, and retention, as well as supporting student learning. Unfortunately, the survey demonstrates that program coverage is lower in regions where literacy rates are low and early marriage and pregnancy are high, as compared with regions where these factors are not as problematic. Each additional level of a girl's education beyond primary school is particularly important as a deterrent to early marriage and pregnancy. Unfortunately, the survey results show that coverage of secondary school students is lowest in those regions where such problems are most acute.

Take-home rations and program objectives

Take-home rations are an effective incentive for school attendance and are generally used in response to poor attendance among certain students/groups. They involve providing

some quantity of food (generally monthly or quarterly supplies of grain or oil) to the students who meet certain attendance goals to take home for their families. While the survey does not allow for a more granular examination of this topic, one quarter of the surveyed school meal programs reported using take-home rations, and most (74%) of those were specifically targeted to “individual characteristics” (based on gender, status as an orphan, or individual rate of school attendance).

Interventions and infrastructure targeted to girls

Two thirds of the responding countries reported that gender-private bathrooms/latrines (separate facilities for girls and boys), which are important for retaining girls, are available in most or all schools. However, less than a third of programs reported that they incorporate menstrual hygiene, although there is evidence that girls sometimes drop out of school at puberty due to a lack of menstrual hygiene supplies and facilities. Half of the programs reported teaching students about reproductive health; just over half of the programs provide HIV prevention education.

Women

The situation regarding women and school meal programs is complicated, as women are both burdened by, and benefit from, involvement in school meal programs. While most cooks are women, and they receive training and perhaps improved status in their communities, school food service work is a low-paid profession even in high income countries. A third of programs surveyed reported that few or no cooks are compensated. The incidence of volunteer cooks was most common, understandably, in low income countries, and the survey seems to indicate that as countries' economic status improves, higher portions of the cooks are paid. Two thirds of the programs reported that they have a purposeful focus on either creating (paid or unpaid) jobs or leadership positions for women. Finally, while not explicitly explored in the survey, other studies indicate that school feeding programs attract more women to become involved in schools, in school management (e.g., through parent-teacher organizations), and in their children's education, while also alleviating some of the household food and labor burden on students' mothers.



For further study or action:

What incentives are needed to elicit better, gender-disaggregated data regarding school feeding and education?

How can school food programs best, and most cost-effectively, reach adolescents? How can countries—already struggling to mobilize the resources needed to ensure maternal and infant nutrition and to feed their preschoolers and primary schoolchildren—support the nutrition and retention of secondary school students, especially girls? How effective and scalable are menstrual hygiene programs? What can be learned and shared from those with experience in these areas?

Do volunteer cooks feel that they are benefiting from the role? Does trend data support what the survey appears to indicate—that as countries progress economically, more cooks get paid (in cash) for their work?

AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL PURCHASING

The survey points to multiple opportunities to strengthen program engagement with agriculture and to use local purchasing, especially from small-scale farmers, as a tool for economic development. Most programs (82%) reported purchasing school food domestically; several low income countries viewed this as a positive and new form of sourcing food for their programs. However, only a third of countries reported having laws, policies, or standards for agriculture linked to school feeding; very few countries reported that their ministries of agriculture have decision-making responsibility for key functions related to school feeding; less than half of the surveyed programs reported involving farmers; and the levels of engagement with farmers varied significantly across geographic regions.

Nonetheless, there are efforts to support the involvement of smallholder farmers in many countries; some tools (such as extension, training, and subsidies) are used more frequently than others (such as mobile payments and purchase agreements).

The survey showed strong links between local purchasing and the diversity of the school food basket, but no information was captured regarding whether school meals programs have an impact on the cost or nutritional quality of what farmers produce. Issues of droughts, floods, climate change, and the inability to produce adequate amounts of food locally were raised by multiple survey respondents, as well.



For further study or action:

What local economic stimuli linked to school meal programs are possible in areas unable to produce adequate amounts of food? What are the barriers to involving the agriculture sector in program implementation, and how can they be overcome? Which school feeding-related laws, policies, and standards are most necessary and helpful in the agriculture sector? Which tools are most effective for engaging smallholders, and under what conditions? Can public sector food purchasing be a driver of higher production and/or lower cost of nutritious foods? Can school menus and purchases be tailored to emphasize foods that are resilient to climate change?

JOBS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

School feeding programs create jobs, but very few programs keep track of how many and what kinds of jobs are involved. The sole exception is that most programs reported large numbers of (paid and unpaid) cooks employed in their programs. Meanwhile, the lack of employment opportunities—particularly in rural areas, and particularly for women and youth—is a significant global problem, with the most severe cases being in low income countries, where education levels are relatively low and there are high numbers of unemployed youth. School feeding presents opportunities for a variety of relatively low-skilled jobs. Yet just 30% of programs reported a special focus on creating opportunities for youth, and just 32% reported a focus on creating opportunities for other groups.

On a related note, school meal programs create opportunities for economic development through the private sector, but few programs seem to count or to leverage opportunities to strengthen their private sector through program engagement. Excluding farmers (which—though businesspeople—were treated separately in the survey), the most commonly reported types of private sector involvement were for transport and supply of utensils. Less than 20% of countries reported school feeding-related national laws, policies, or standards focused on the private sector; and very few programs reported private sector job numbers.

For further study or action:

Can repeating the survey every two to three years lead to improved data and reporting of job types and numbers? Are there particular impediments to involving relevant government agencies (labor, women's affairs, youth employment, etc.) in school meal programs? What can be learned from the experience of countries that do report training and employment numbers regarding how to mount and maintain training and employment programs specifically linked to school feeding? Which countries have success stories with public-private partnerships that might serve as models for those aspiring to strengthen their private sectors? Do job creation and private sector engagement contribute to a country's tax base, returning at least a portion of the cost back to public coffers? How important are job creation and successful private sector engagement in terms of program sustainability?

COMMUNITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

The survey results demonstrate that community engagement with schools—which is known to have positive consequences for students and schools alike—is very high in school meal program schools. Parents and/or other community members are engaged in their school feeding programs in about 90% of programs and countries, and engagement is generally a requirement. Examples of how such engagement is manifested range from fairly basic tasks such as contributing cash, food, fuel, materials, and/or labor to offset program costs and improve school infrastructure, to more managerial responsibilities such as serving on school management committees, monitoring program implementation, and making local food purchases for the schools. Civil society involvement was reported in only about half of the programs, but the roles described for civil society organizations were quite substantive and managerial in nature.

For further study or action:

Are school feeding programs requiring too much/too little of parents and other community members? What factors encourage and support involvement, and what factors discourage involvement? What learning can be gleaned, and what good practices can be promulgated, regarding community and civil society engagement?

ENVIRONMENTAL AND WASTE ISSUES

Survey results show that much more could—and should—be done in this area. Post-harvest food loss is a very serious problem, and such losses average about 30% globally; in Africa, losses are estimated to be up to 20% for cereals, 30% for dairy and fish, and 40% for fruits and vegetables (FAO 2019). Yet most countries and programs reported taking only the most basic steps to limit food waste (through sealed storage and pest control) and limit negative environmental impacts of packaging waste (by reusing bags and containers). In the survey, other options in each category were rarely selected. Additionally, almost three quarters of programs reported using wood or charcoal for food preparation, sometimes even acknowledging that this had a negative impact on the environment.



For further study or action:

What affordable, scalable options exist for school meal programs to mitigate food losses and any negative environmental impacts from food preparation methods and packaging? Does local purchasing have a measurable and net positive effect on reducing the carbon footprint for the transportation of school food? Are any educational interventions or complementary activities effective at supporting school children to be good stewards of food and the environment?

EMERGENCIES

The survey documents that school feeding is considered extremely important in emergency situations. A stunning 63.5% of countries reported experiencing an emergency during the reporting year. Among those, a third maintained the programs and reported no impact, and some even increased the programs in some way to mitigate the impact of the emergency. That said, emergencies exacted a toll in many of the affected countries, requiring program reductions, or—in 18% of the cases—compelling some of the school feeding programs to cease operations. The survey asked whether measures were in place to prepare the school feeding program for future emergencies; 60% of the (60) countries that answered this question reported that they do have measures in place.



For further study or action:

Which—if any—preparedness measures have proven useful so far for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic? Were countries that had experienced health-related emergencies or epidemics (such as Ebola) better prepared to handle the COVID-19 pandemic? How do programs secure financial support to address emergencies that require immediate attention? How can school meal programs be used to reach large numbers of vulnerable people during crises, and what factors support or inhibit their effectiveness in “pivoting” in the course of such emergencies?