

Executive Summary

In 2019, the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) conducted a Global Survey of School Meal Programs © in order to build a school meal¹ program database that gathers standardized information across all countries and sectors and covers a comprehensive set of school-based feeding activities. Responses were received from 103 countries, of which 85 had a large-scale school feeding program operating in their country and submitted a survey, and 18 stated that they had no large-scale program. The 85 participating countries and the 160 school meal programs operating within them are the focus of this report. While the countries from which responses were received represent 53% of the countries in the world, they contain 78% of the world's 2017 population.

The survey asked for data from “the most recently completed school year.” One third (32%) of the countries reported data from the 2018/19 school year, 26% from the 2018 school year, and 42% from the 2017/18 school year.

Across the 85 countries, an estimated 297.3 million children of all ages received food through school meal programs in the most recently completed school year. The average coverage rate increases incrementally with rising wealth levels, ranging from 17% across low income countries to 37% across high income countries. This underscores the manner in which national coverage of school feeding programs tends to be lowest precisely where the needs are greatest. While less than half (47%) of the countries targeted secondary



¹This report uses the terms “school meal” and “school feeding” interchangeably in reference to all programs that fall under such headings.

school students, all countries with school feeding programs reported providing food to those in primary school, reaching (in aggregate) 35% of primary school-age children and 38% of enrolled primary school students. School meals were also served to preschoolers in two-thirds of the countries, though this is more likely in higher-income settings. Just half (52%) of the school meal programs captured in this survey were able to report some gender-disaggregated numbers of students receiving food, with this value much higher in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

Across the school meal programs captured in this report, and for the reported school year, in-school meals were by far the most common modality through which to deliver food to students. Specifically, 88% of programs serve meals in schools, 17% serve snacks, and 25% provide take-home rations. Some items, including grains/cereals, legumes/nuts, oil, and salt, were found on the school menu in almost all programs, while others, such as eggs, meat, and poultry, were found in 40-50% of the programs. Food basket diversity increases with rising wealth and also varies across different regions, with the highest average diversity found in Latin America & the Caribbean, and the lowest found in the Middle East & North Africa. School menus tended to include a greater diversity of food items when food was procured through domestic purchase, rather than foreign in-kind donations.

The most common avenue through which school meal programs reported procuring food was through domestic purchase, with 82% procuring some food through this avenue. The next most common avenue was the receipt of in-kind donations from domestic sources, followed by in-kind donations from other countries. Among the school feeding programs that purchased any food, 76% procured at least some of the purchased food from within the local community. Nevertheless, challenges associated with local procurement, such as limited production capacity in regions with low food security, were often raised by survey respondents.

Many countries across all income levels contributed a sizable share of the funding for school meal programs. In eight countries, the share contributed by government was 1% or less. At the other end of the spectrum, 33 countries (including some from every region) reported contributing 100% of the funding for their school meal activities. Funding was characterized as “adequate” by about half of the school meal programs, and as expected, this increased in wealthier settings. There is a strong correlation between school feeding coverage rates and having school feeding as a national budget line item; 26% of primary and secondary school-age children receive food through their schools in countries with a line item, while this value was 15% in countries with no line item.

In 62% of the programs summarized in this report, a government agency at some level was responsible for the school feeding program. Nearly one-third of the programs have experienced transitions in management, sometimes in the course of decentralization and sometimes when shifting from an implementing partner toward government management and ownership.

A large majority of school meal programs (87%) cited the goal of improving students' nutrition among their objectives. It was also common for programs to provide special nutrition training for cooks or caterers and to engage nutritionists. Sixty-eight percent of programs served fortified foods—such as oil, salt, grains/cereals, and corn-soy blend or biscuits—on the school menu, though it was less common for programs to provide students with micronutrient supplements (at 22%) or serve biofortified foods (at 12%). School meal programs were often paired with complementary services or programs related to health or hygiene, such as handwashing and deworming treatment. In total, 91% of programs offered nutrition education, and 78% paired the school meal program with school gardens. Less than one-quarter of school meal programs listed the reduction of obesity among their goals.

The most common type of job associated with school meal programs was the category of cooks and food preparers. These were overwhelmingly female: over three-quarters of the cooks were women in 78% of the school meal programs. However, 31% of programs reported that very few or no cooks receive payment for their work, and it was most common for cooks to work on a volunteer basis in low income countries. Farmers were directly engaged in some manner in school meal operations in 43% of the school meal programs, and targeted support (such as agricultural subsidies or training) was more commonly provided to small-scale farmers. The private sector was also involved in school meal operations in 40% of the programs.

Survey respondents were asked to summarize the strengths, weaknesses, successes, and challenges of the programs operating in their countries. Among the successes enumerated, respondents often highlighted the manner in which school meal programs are associated with improved schooling and health outcomes for students. Respondents also celebrated the inclusion of a wider diversity of food items on the school menu, and local procurement of food items (as in home-grown school feeding programs) are understood to raise the income of family farmers. Another common 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.

Among the challenges associated with school feeding, inadequate and unpredictable budgets were emphasized across many countries, particularly in those without a budget line for their school feeding programs. Interviewees also noted difficulties related to supply chains and logistics, such pipeline breaks, food losses in transit, and poor access to some regions/schools. Another common challenge across most regions was inadequate human resources, with frequent turnover of personnel and insufficient budgets to retain skilled, committed professionals. Other reported issues related to weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation systems and different forms of mismanagement within school feeding programs. The survey respondents delineated the research needed to improve

their school feeding programs, with topics including (among others) the benefits and costs of local food procurement, nutritional assessments of specific school meal menus, and the mobilization of the private sector to finance school canteens.

This report concludes with a set of broad recommendations for policy makers. Where programs are managed by implementing partners and government capacity is not being engaged, GCNF recommends that such engagement be strongly encouraged to foster program sustainability. Observing that school meal programs tend to include a more diverse diet when food is procured through domestic purchase, GCNF recommends that more attention be given to the domestic purchase of food items. As school meal programs are more resilient when they create work, training, and other economic and status-enhancing opportunities in their communities, GCNF recommends that programs place emphasis on such activities—especially for women, youth, and marginalized groups. In addition, it is imperative to gather evidence regarding the extent to which programs are meeting their stated objectives, particularly with respect to those that have been introduced fairly recently, such as support for agriculture or obesity mitigation. Finally, acknowledging that survey respondents sometimes found it challenging to complete the survey, often because the data do not exist or were not accessible, GCNF recommends that development partners focus on capacity strengthening around data collection, monitoring, and evaluation of school meal programs, using consistent terminology and methods.