

# Background

## RATIONALE FOR THE GLOBAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS ©

School meal programs<sup>2</sup>—in which students are provided with snacks, meals, or other foods in or through schools—are common throughout the world. In 2018, the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) undertook a systematic effort to collect information on the current state of school feeding in each country worldwide. GCNF surveyed both the academic and gray literature to glean a picture of the “landscape” of school meal programs in each setting, inclusive of their level of coverage (number of beneficiaries), food basket contents, and complementary programs, among other topics. Not surprisingly, we found that the quantity and quality of information available on school feeding is extremely inconsistent across countries and even across different programs within the same country. Furthermore, information is not collected and published regularly. This makes it impossible to refer to the currently available information to compare school feeding operations across different settings or to discern trends over time. This exercise underscored the need for a global school meal database that periodically gathers standardized information across all countries and sectors and covers a comprehensive set of school-based feeding activities within a given period of time.



<sup>2</sup> While aware of distinctions that may exist between the terms school meal, school feeding, and school nutrition (programs), we use school feeding and school meals interchangeably throughout this document, as we aim to capture information regarding all such programs.

In order to fill this gap, GCNF conducted a Global Survey of School Meal Programs © in 2019. The survey captures information on the scope of school feeding activities in each country during the most recently completed school year, with details on the characteristics (including age and gender) of beneficiaries. The survey also captures detailed information on the avenues through which school meal programs procure and distribute food; the extent and nature of government involvement with school feeding; job creation in school meal programs and engagement with farmers and the private sector; and related health and sanitation topics. The survey was administered to one “focal point”<sup>3</sup> from each country who was equipped to gather the necessary information and provide approval for its inclusion in a global database; this survey respondent also provided commentary on school feeding in their country and identified research needs.

The Global Survey of School Meal Programs © has multiple objectives. First, the responses to this country-level survey have been used to develop and periodically update a database on the current state of school feeding programs in many countries of the world. This survey database will enable a participating country to share information about its school meal programs with stakeholders around the world, identify trends, strengths and weaknesses within specific programs, and learn from the experiences of other countries. Another aim of the survey is to help countries recognize and remedy gaps in data collection and monitoring. Thus, wherever information is sparse in the 2019 survey, we encourage governments to gather information for a more complete understanding of their school feeding activities going forward. An example is the tabulation of jobs created in school meal programs, which is done meticulously by some countries but not at all by others. A final goal of the survey is to make the database available to the public for use by researchers and other interested parties.

In order to track how school meal programs evolve over time, GCNF plans to administer a second round of the survey in 2021, with the goal of repeating the survey every two or three years thereafter. Among the goals of this longitudinal study, GCNF intends to monitor whether school meal programs are reaching more or fewer children each year; the impact of crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) and more subtle developments (such as changes in countries’ policies or economic status) on their programs; how the characteristics of these programs are changing; and how governments adjust their budgets and management responsibilities.

<sup>3</sup> A focal point is a representative appointed by the national government of a country to gather information and provide responses for this survey.

## METHOD

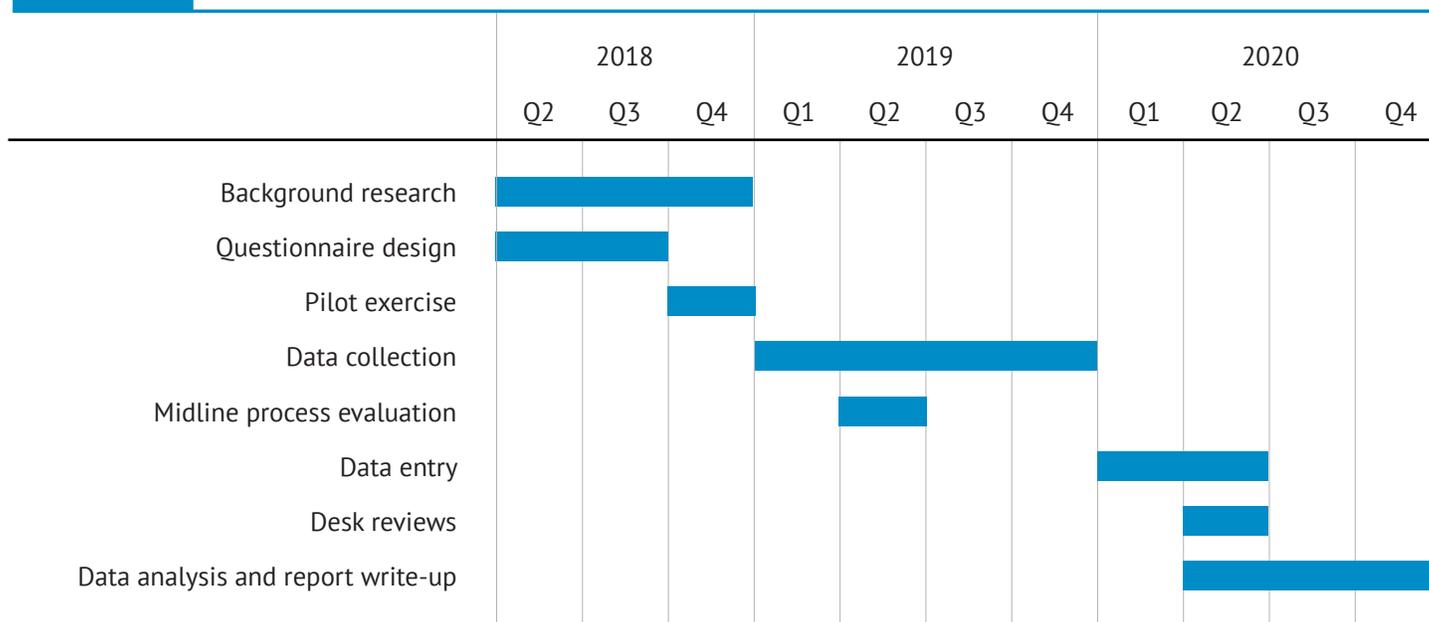
Building on the existing literature and studies undertaken by GCNF's partners, GCNF began the survey process by drafting a core set of topics and questions for a comprehensive survey of school meal programs. Between April and September 2018, GCNF solicited input on the proposed topics, questions, and survey design from 15 institutions and independent experts and received comments from some 25 individuals. After incorporating the feedback, GCNF translated the survey and called for countries to participate in a pilot round. Four countries (Benin, Nepal, Sao Tome and Principe, and the United States) volunteered to participate in a pilot exercise that was undertaken in December 2018, after which minor revisions were made and the survey was finalized.

Data collection for the Global Survey of School Meal Programs © took place throughout 2019 (Figure 1). Survey teams were positioned in Asia, Africa, and North America and were responsible for reaching out to the governments of countries in their respective portfolios to secure their cooperation. GCNF requested that each government designate as a “focal point” an individual who was knowledgeable about school feeding activities in the country and/or could gather needed information from other sources to complete the survey, and who could also obtain government clearance for the results to be included in the global database. While the survey was conducted at a global scale with outreach to almost all countries, priority was given to low income and lower middle income countries.

The survey was administered first as a PDF form (sent and returned by email), accompanied by a detailed glossary of terms used in the questionnaire. Both the survey and glossary are found in Annex C of this report. Subsequently, in a few cases, countries requested and were provided the survey in Word form. Additionally, a few countries that initially hesitated to complete the survey were provided with a shortened version with fewer questions. The survey submissions were reviewed by GCNF in order to ensure the clarity of survey responses to the greatest extent possible. The survey teams compared the information provided by a given country with the information gathered in the systematic literature review that preceded the survey (discussed above); published UNESCO or other United Nations data; or data from official government websites. There was often dialogue with the focal point (survey respondent) to confirm or amend responses. As an example, if the reported number of students receiving food through school meal programs was not consistent with the total number of students in the country, this would be raised with the focal point and perhaps identified as a typo. It was not possible to verify all parts of the survey or insist that the survey be filled in completely, particularly when information on a given topic did not seem to exist or was not accessible to the focal point.

Following data collection, the survey team conducted a set of “desk reviews” for additional countries that did not respond to the survey. This entailed consulting public resources for a given country in order to gather several key data points (for the most recent year available) that were addressed in the questionnaire. In this report, data collected from secondary sources through desk reviews will be treated separately from the main survey results.

**FIGURE 1** TIMELINE OF THE 2019 GLOBAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS ©



## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of the present survey merit mention. First, the survey was necessarily limited in how much detail could be captured regarding within-program heterogeneity, as when characteristics of a given school meal program vary across different states or districts within a country. Several of the larger programs in India, the United States, and elsewhere seem to exhibit such variation over space, and a “deeper dive” (or a state-level survey) would be needed to characterize these programs in a more comprehensive manner. Second, focal points (survey respondents) may have more familiarity with school feeding operations in public schools as compared to private schools. In countries where private schools are prevalent, as is the case in South Asia, this may present as a gap in the survey responses. This may particularly affect reporting on preschool coverage if

private preschools are relatively more common than private primary schools. It is our hope that survey responses will improve in their comprehensiveness as this survey is repeated in future years. Finally, the results reported here comprise an inventory of school meal programs and their key features. This report also presents the views of the focal points regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the current implementation. While these perspectives are necessarily subjective, this is intended to complement a large existing body of literature on impact evaluation which is seldom at a global scale.

## RESPONSE RATE

GCNF worked from the United Nations listing of 194 countries. Of these, GCNF identified six that it chose not to approach due to political crises or natural disasters during the data collection period. Among the remaining 188 countries, GCNF attempted to make contact with every country for which it could identify a government agency or official contact. In total, some type of response was received from 116 countries, 85 of whom had a large-scale school feeding program operating in their country and submitted a survey (Figure 2). Eighteen countries responded that they had no large-scale school feeding program, and 13 countries responded but declined to participate in the 2019 survey (though sometimes specifying that they will participate in the next round).

A detailed breakdown of the response rate is provided in Table 1. Fifty-three percent of the 194 countries either submitted a survey or responded that they did not have any large-scale school meal programs. (In total, 62% of the 188 countries that were approached either submitted a response or declined to participate, with 55% submitting a response). Responses were received from 79% of the countries in the South Asia, East Asia & Pacific region and 79% of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The response rate tended to decline with rising wealth levels. Thus, 85% of low income countries and 83% of lower middle income countries submitted a response, while this value was 53% for upper middle income countries and 32% for high income countries. We emphasize that the countries that responded to the survey do not comprise a representative sample, and summary statistics in this report are intended to reflect only the sample of respondents. Nonetheless, the countries from which responses were received contained 78% of the world's population in 2017. Efforts will be made to elicit a greater response rate from higher income countries in future rounds of the Global Survey of School Meal Programs ©.

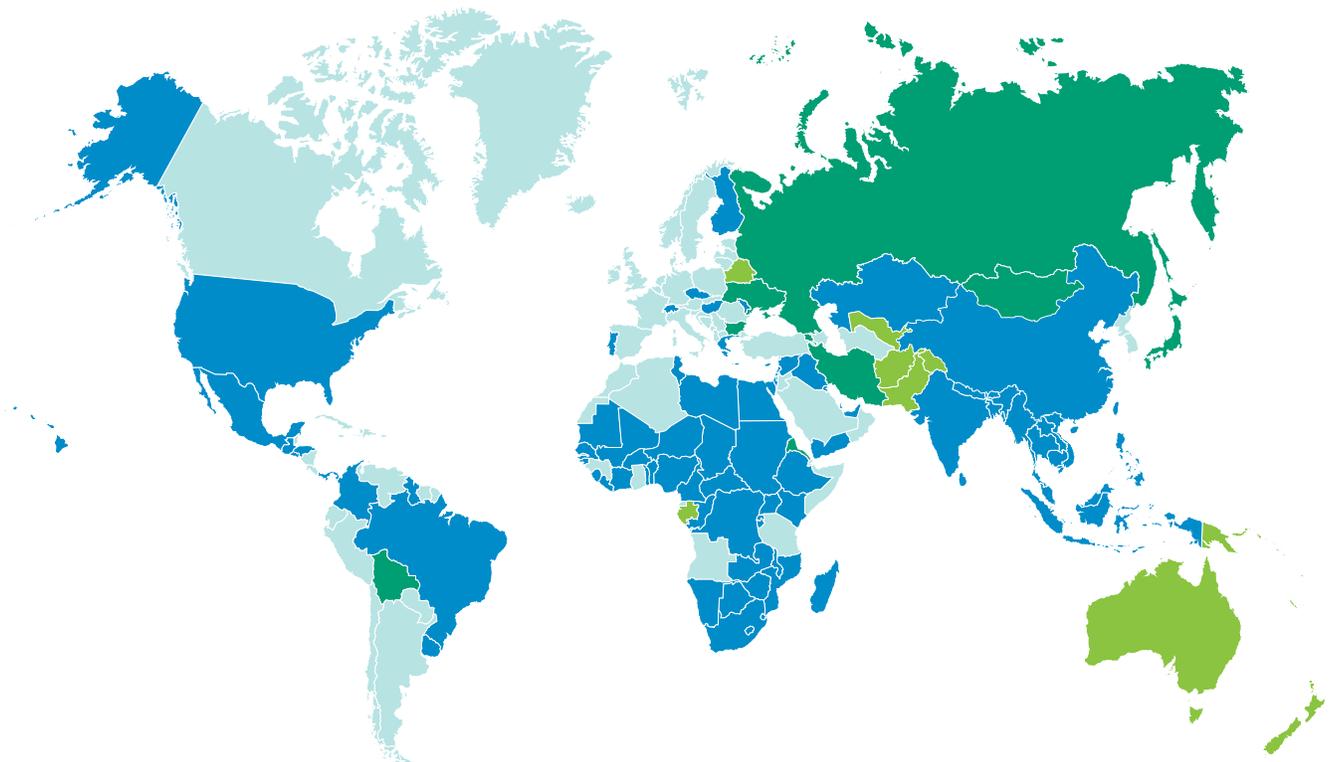
As not all surveys were perfectly complete, this report and the analysis herein is based on the responses available for a given survey question. Sometimes, information was provided at the country level but not at the level of each school meal program, and we use all

information provided to generate this summary of the data. Where appropriate, we specify which countries are missing data or provide the number of observations used to generate a statistic. Because this was a new exercise for the focal points in 2019, we anticipate that the survey will be filled in more completely in the second round of the Global Survey of School Meal Programs © in 2021 and will further improve in subsequent rounds.

As noted earlier, the survey team additionally conducted a set of desk reviews for 23 of the countries that did not respond to the survey. This extra data allows us to provide a more complete picture of school meal programs, sometimes achieving close to perfect coverage across a given region. The maximum number of countries for which we have data (for a subset of data points) is therefore 126 (103 country responses plus 23 desk reviews). However, the countries for which GCNF conducted a desk review were not selected in a systematic manner. For this reason, this report summarizes data gathered through desk reviews separately from the main survey results.

**FIGURE 2**

**SURVEY RESPONSE STATUS FOR THE 2019 GLOBAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS ©**



**SURVEY STATUS:**



SURVEY RECEIVED



RESPONSE RECEIVED,  
NO PROGRAM



DECLINED TO PARTICIPATE



NO RESPONSE

TABLE 1

RESPONSE RATE FOR THE 2019 GLOBAL SURVEY OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS ©

		Number countries	Number surveys received	Number responded, no program	Response rate (%)
<b>Region</b>	Sub-Saharan Africa	48	36	2	79
	South Asia, East Asia & Pacific	38	19	11	79
	Middle East & North Africa	21	7	2	43
	Latin America & Caribbean	33	10	0	30
	North America, Europe & Central Asia	54	13	3	30
<b>Income group</b>	Low income	34	26	2	82
	Lower middle income	46	28	8	78
	Upper middle income	55	18	5	42
	High income	59	13	3	27
<b>All</b>		<b>194</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>53</b>

Note: The region groupings used in this report loosely match those employed by the World Bank. However, North America is combined here with the Europe & Central Asia region to ensure a suitable number of countries in each group, and South Asia is combined with the East Asia & Pacific region for the same reason. The country income groups used in this report reflect the World Bank classifications in 2018 (World Bank 2020) and are based on gross national income (GNI) per capita in 2017.

## DATA ACCESS

The responses received in the 2019 Global Survey of School Meal Programs © are summarized in a set of country reports that are available for download at [survey.gcnf.org](https://survey.gcnf.org). The survey data will be made available to the public upon request. In addition, key elements of the survey submissions (i.e., those captured in the country reports) have been translated into English and summarized in an accompanying database. Data captured for additional countries through a desk review following the survey data collection are also included in this database, with an indicator for the mode through which these data were gathered. Further information on how to access this resource is available at [survey.gcnf.org](https://survey.gcnf.org).