

CHAPTER 2

Characteristics of Beneficiaries and Components of the School Meal Programs

The school meal programs covered in this report exhibit a range of objectives (Table 2). Almost all programs (at 93%) were designed to meet educational goals, and 88% aimed to meet nutritional and/or health goals. It was also fairly common, at 73%, for programs to serve as a social safety net, ensuring food access for poor or vulnerable children. It was far less common, at 35%, for programs to directly incorporate agricultural goals into their work, and very few programs specifically aimed to prevent obesity (as will be discussed in detail in **Chapter 6: Health and Nutrition**). Programs in higher income countries were less likely than others to cite education or agricultural goals. Note that some of these objectives had been introduced to the school meal “landscape” fairly recently, and there remains much to be learned about the extent to which they are achieved.

Beyond the objectives enumerated in Table 2, school meal programs sometimes play an even wider role in society. They are understood to strengthen social cohesion and solidarity in Greece and to build students’ character in Indonesia. In Finland, school canteens serve as a setting for students to learn teamwork and entrepreneurship and to cultivate civic engagement.

TABLE 2 OBJECTIVES OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Objective	Share of programs (%)
To meet educational goals	93
To meet nutritional and/or health goals	88
To provide a social safety net	73
To meet agricultural goals	35
To prevent or mitigate obesity	25

As noted, among the 85 countries with some school feeding activity, every country targeted the primary school level (Table 3). In 18 countries, primary school students were the only beneficiaries of school meals. In two-thirds of the countries, school meals were also served to preschoolers; this was more likely in higher income countries, with

preschool students included in 58%, 64%, 67%, and 85% of low, lower middle, upper middle, and high income countries, respectively. It was less common (at 47%) for countries to provide food for secondary school students. Students of vocational or trade schools benefited from school meal programs in 12 countries, and only Kazakhstan reported that university students were included in their school meal program. The student numbers for all countries, disaggregated by school level, are provided in Table A1 in Annex A of this report.

The size of school meal programs tended to differ by the school levels targeted, with programs that operate in primary schools typically being the largest. The median number of primary school students receiving food, among those programs that targeted the primary level, was 203,073 students. (Because the size distribution is skewed towards the high end, the average value is far larger than the median at 1.8 million students). For programs that operated in secondary schools, the median number of secondary students receiving food was 63,483 (average = 937,361), and for programs that operated in preschool, the median number of preschool students receiving food was 28,279 (average = 242,967).

TABLE 3

SCHOOL LEVELS RECEIVING FOOD THROUGH SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

		Share of countries (%) serving food in...					
		Preschools	Primary schools	Secondary schools	Vocational/Trade schools	University/Higher education	Other levels
Region	Sub-Saharan Africa	58	100	42	8	0	6
	South Asia, East Asia & Pacific	63	100	28	0	0	11
	Middle East & North Africa	43	100	43	16	0	14
	Latin America & Caribbean	90	100	70	30	0	30
	North America, Europe & Central Asia	85	100	75	38	8	0
Income group	Low income	58	100	46	12	0	8
	Lower middle income	64	100	30	4	0	11
	Upper middle income	67	100	44	17	6	11
	High income	85	100	92	38	0	8
All	66	100	47	14	1	9	

Just half (52%) of the school meal programs captured in this survey were able to report some gender-disaggregated numbers of students receiving food (Figure 7). However, this varied across income groups and regions. While 64-68% of programs in low income and lower middle income countries reported gender-disaggregated numbers, just 31% in upper middle income countries and 16% in higher income countries did so. This value was much higher in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia than other regions. Information on gender was also not captured uniformly across school levels. Thus, 56-57% of programs that

provided food for preschool or primary school-age children reported separate numbers for male and female students, while this value was 38% for those serving secondary school students (Figure 8). The collection of more complete gender-disaggregated data is necessary to better monitor the activities and impacts of school meal programs at all levels. Note that gender-disaggregated numbers of students receiving food may not align with the gender breakdown in school enrollment, as some programs specifically targeted regions with low levels of girls' schooling, and take-home rations (discussed in the next paragraph) were often targeted individually at girls. Among those programs that reported gender-specific numbers, girls comprised 49% (and boys, 51%) of the students receiving food.

School feeding programs may target students based on geography (for example, serving schools in regions with especially high poverty rates) or individual characteristics (for example, targeting female students or children residing in poor households). It was more common for students to be targeted based on geographic considerations (in 71% of programs), rather than individual characteristics (in 31% of programs). For example, the Home-Grown School Meals Program in Kenya implemented geographic targeting towards food insecure areas, serving all schools in arid areas and targeted schools in semi-arid areas. In Togo, the National School Feeding Program targeting was based on a poverty map of the country. The prevalence of geographic targeting in school meal programs was also noted by Bundy et al. (2009, p. 15) and was more common in lower-income settings. Specifically, the rate at which programs targeted based on geography was 92% in low income countries and 70%, 53%, and 20% in lower middle, upper middle, and high income countries, respectively. Targeting based on individual characteristics was more common for food distributed in the form of take-home rations. Specifically, 74% of the cases of take-home rations targeted them individually, often based on gender, status as an orphan, or record of school attendance. In Mongolia, for example, the National School Feeding Program for Special Schools reported providing meals for disabled children.

FIGURE 7 SHARE OF PROGRAMS THAT REPORT GENDER-DISAGGREGATED STUDENT NUMBERS

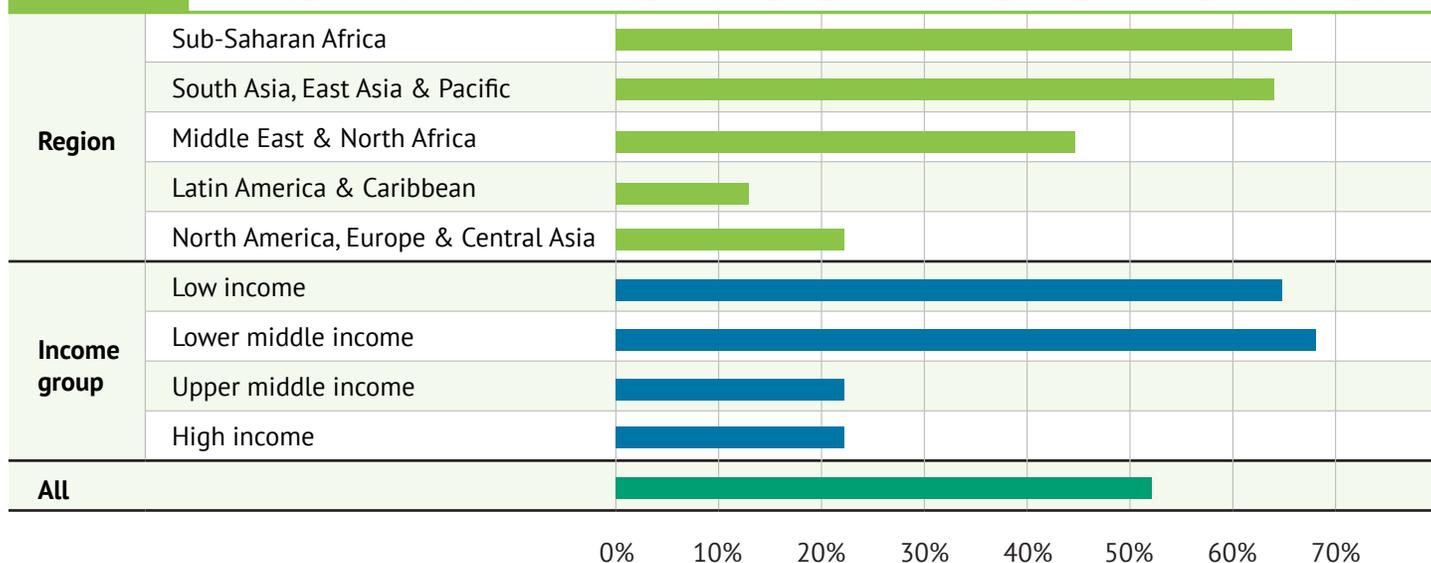


FIGURE 8

SHARE OF PROGRAMS THAT REPORT GENDER-DISAGGREGATED NUMBERS, BY SCHOOL LEVEL

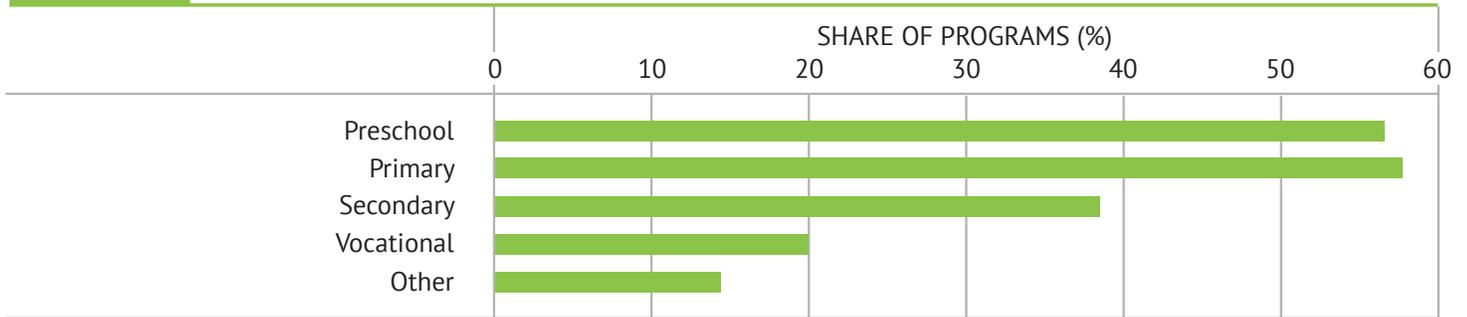
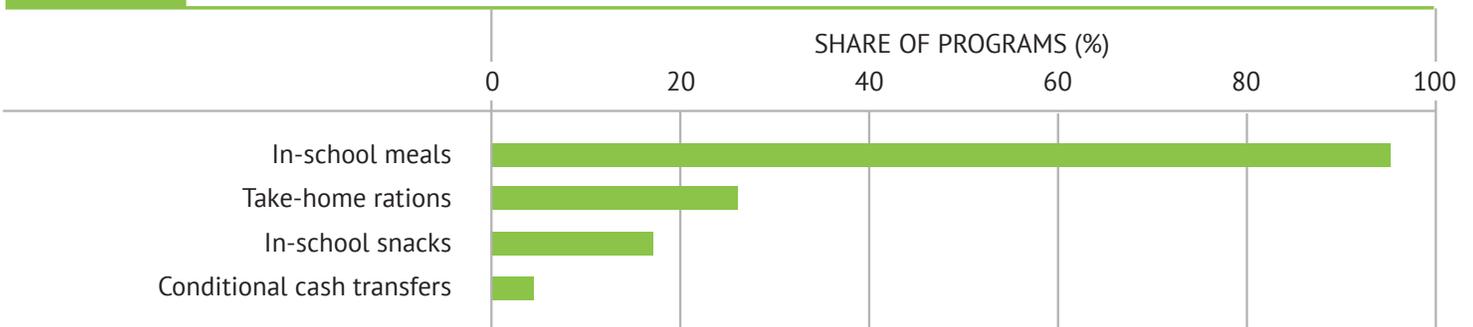


FIGURE 9

MODALITIES OF FOOD DELIVERY ACROSS PROGRAMS



Across the 160 programs captured in this report, in-school meals were by far the most common modality through which to deliver food to students (Figure 9). Specifically, 88% of programs served meals in schools, 17% served snacks (per the survey respondents’ classifications of what constitutes a “snack” versus a “meal”), and 25% provided take-home rations. Take-home rations were more common at lower income levels. In addition, 5% of programs indicated that they provided students with cash transfers; however, this was almost never the sole avenue through which a program improved food access for students. Indeed, programs often provided food through multiple modalities. While some offered meals only (57%) or snacks only (10%), the remaining programs had multiple modalities, the most popular combination being meals/snacks and take-home rations (in 14% of programs).



88%

of programs served meals in schools



17%

served snacks



25%

provided take-home rations

Lunch, the most common meal served in schools, was part of school meal programs in 82% of the countries. Breakfast was served in 40% of the countries, while an evening meal (dinner) was served in three countries (specifically in programs that operate in boarding schools).¹⁵ Food was provided only during the school year in most cases, though programs in Cameroon, Hungary, India, Portugal, and Uruguay also offered food to students during the school break.

According to survey responses, in-school meals were served five or six times per week in 89% of the programs and two to three times per week in another 7%. Snacks were served at a similar frequency. (Note that it is not known how often there is a discrepancy between the planned or “official” frequency of meals and actual implementation). As will be discussed in **Chapter 10: Program Sustainability**, 31% of countries that experienced an emergency in the previous year had decreased the frequency of school feeding. Take-home rations were made available less frequently, often at monthly intervals or at other frequencies, such as quarterly, biannually, or during the lean season.

¹⁵ Generally, food served in boarding schools is not considered to be part of a school meal program if the cost is covered by the students' families.