School Meals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

School meal programs are one of the most widespread safety nets in the world, operating in a greater number of countries than any other safety net program.\(^1\) The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted school schedules around the world, limiting the ability of millions of children to access a daily, nutritious meal. The Global Survey of School Meal Programs © captured some of the impact.

**SCHOOL CLOSURES**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic,
- 78% of countries indicated that schools were not open for in-person learning for at least one month.
- 58% of countries indicated that schools were not open for in-person learning for at least 6 months.

**IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS**

- 64% of programs saw a change in the number of students receiving food.
- 49% of programs saw a change in the frequency of school feeding.
- 19% of programs saw a change in the size of rations.
- 23% of programs saw a change in the level of food basket variety.
- 43% of programs saw a change in the amount of funding.

**CHANGES IN MODALITY OR POINT OF FOOD DISTRIBUTION**

- 51% of programs served meals differently (e.g., fewer children eating together at the same time).
- 43% of programs made ingredients available for pick-up.
- 40% of programs made meals available for pick-up.
- 20% of programs delivered ingredients to students' homes.
- 14% of programs provided electronic payments or vouchers.
- 9% of programs provided cash or physical vouchers.

**RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

(including temporary changes)
- 41% of programs had to cease feeding operations, at least temporarily.
- 29% of programs reported a change in beneficiaries.
- 35% of programs reported a change in venue (location).
- 55% of programs reported a change in feeding modality (often from in-school meals to take-home rations).
- 4% of programs reported a change in the source of funding.

**OTHER EMERGENCIES**

COVID-19 was not the only emergency facing countries during the school year that began in 2020; the stress of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic sometimes made it more difficult to respond effectively to other emergencies.

Almost half of the programs, or 45.90%, reported that their country was affected by at least one other emergency in addition to COVID-19, while 16.40% of programs reported that their country was affected by at least two other emergencies.

- In the Philippines, efforts to respond to natural disasters were hindered by the mobility restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and by the limited financial resources available to respond to multiple emergencies at once.
- Mozambique was similarly affected by several other emergencies (including natural disasters and conflict) that challenged emergency services and exacerbated the risks associated with COVID-19.

**EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES**

- Kiribati, Malaysia, and Niger
  - Water And Sanitation hygiene (WASH) compliance in schools improved.
- Italy
  - There is now greater consideration of feeding the programs through tax-exempts.
- Palau
  - Breakfis has been added to the Food Service Program.
- Sierra Leone
  - Take-home rations were provided to households to alleviate food shortages, existing greater community interest in the school feeding program.
- Namibia
  - Schools in Namibia saw the provision of more eating utensils to avoid sharing utensils, improvements in the provision of water and sanitation facilities, and a strong handwashing campaign.
- Brazil
  - Although take-home rations are not typically part of the National School Feeding Program, the relevant legislation was quickly enacted at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that meals would be made available to be picked up and eaten at home while in-person classes were suspended.
- Argentina
  - Federal funding for school feeding increased, which in turn enabled the School Food Reinforcement (Reforzamiento Alimentario-Educativo) program to expand to reach more...