



## **Communiqué**

### **School Meal Programs in an Era of Food Systems Transformation**

#### **Preamble:**

The 24th Global Child Nutrition Forum was organized by the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) in cooperation with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT); the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF); the School Meals Coalition; and International Child Nutrition Japan.

Held in Osaka, Japan in December 2024, the Forum brought together 408 participants. Arriving from 82 countries around the world, participants ranged from officials from government and multilateral institutions to representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the business sector, academics, and researchers. In an effort to recognize and document the voices, priorities, and needs of participants, each day participants were provided with prompts designed to elicit information from two district groups: 1) government representatives and 2) partners (NGOs, Private Sector, Academia, Other). This document is developed to serve as a rallying point for school meal program advocacy and policy around the world. The Communiqué development process was facilitated by Eric Mitchell, President, Alliance to End Hunger.

#### **Voices of Governments:**

From 2022 to 2024, the majority of governments observed an increase in the quality of their school meal programs.

*There are things that hinder or prevent governments from maintaining or improving the quality of their school meal programs, including:*

- Insufficient intersectoral coordination and collaboration.
- Unstable funding.
- Limited infrastructure (such as adequate kitchens, storage spaces, and transport).
- Home-grown school feeding is not always an available option due to limited supply of quality food, due to a number of factors:
  - Climatic shocks make it difficult to produce all the foods needed for local purchases.
  - Limited capacity of actors across value chains.
  - Absence of national laws, policies and standards on the involvement of smallholder farmers and farmer cooperatives in school feeding programs.



- Limited monitoring and evaluation systems to generate evidence and monitor progress.
- Significant turnover of government officials.
- Lack of nutritionists/dietitians dedicated to the program to help ensure nutritious and balanced meals.

*There are things that help governments improve the quality of their school meal programs, including:*

- Multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination between ministries of education, agriculture, health, finance and others to ensure a comprehensive approach. This can also include:
  - Establishing an intersectoral system for managing the school feeding program.
  - Joint advocacy for school feeding legislation that engages parliament and local councils.
  - Ensuring coordination at the national, provincial & local levels.
- Sustainable government financing through a dedicated school feeding budget. This can also include:
  - Developing a national school feeding sustainability strategy along with a work plan with performance indicators.
  - Additional funding streams dedicated to school feeding that are included in education and agriculture laws.
- Capacity building and technical assistance for actors across the value chain, including smallholder farmers and school feeding staff. This can be done by:
  - Developing public-private partnerships across the value chain.
  - Training local farmers to improve their production capacity.
- Community participation that involves parents, teachers, supervisors, communities, & farmers to guarantee that the program responds to the local needs & traditions.

*Government school meal programs already contribute to food systems transformation in the following ways which should continue to be supported and scaled up:*

- Connecting schools with nearby farmer organizations through “Farm to School” schemes, supplying local produce to schools.
  - This ensures a steady supply of locally produced food and creates secure markets for farmers.
  - To support this, central governments can provide funds directly to schools to make local purchases as well as provide advance financing to farmers, encouraging them to increase production with guaranteed demand.

- Another model is to engage women's farmer organizations which can generate financial opportunities for local women.
- This model can encourage farmers to adopt more sustainable practices through the tendering process, by championing fresh and organic local produce in schools.
- Investing in improvements in transporting fresh food is an important consideration.
- Developing school gardens to introduce nutritious foods to children and increase meal diversity.
- Promoting local and traditional culture and cuisine on school meal menus to help students increase their appreciation for nutritious local food.
- Popularizing alternative sources of fuel for clean cooking.

*For governments-led school meal programs to further support food systems transformation, the following should be prioritized:*

- Increase community-led processing facilities to support local food processing.
- Develop certification guidelines for local products to facilitate local procurement.
- Foster young agriculture entrepreneurs to become healthy food champions.
- Promote underutilized fruits and vegetables on school menus and kitchen gardens.
- Support indigenous and other smallholder farmers to increase local productivity of climate resilient crops.
- Engage nutritionists in the classroom and streamline nutrition education throughout the school meal program.

*Governments need the following from partners to implement high-quality school meal programs:*

- Greater collaboration with the private sector, especially aggregators to increase local processing.
- Technical assistance for evidence generation and enhancing national research capacity.

*Other issues that governments feel need attention in the coming year include:*

- Conducting return on investment analysis for their school feeding programs.
- Decreasing turnover of school cooks, by increasing salaries and setting a minimum wage clause for this work.
- Amplify voices on the importance of social inclusion and gender equity in school feeding.



*Governments will be sharing the communiqué with the following stakeholders, and will be using it in the following ways:*

- It will be shared with:
  - Relevant Ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, Agriculture, Gender, Social Protection, and Health to support advocacy.
  - Technical and financial partners; local and regional officials and communities; School management committees; and donors.
- It will be used to boost interest and gather joint involvement of key stakeholders in the design and development of the program.
- It will also be used as an advocacy tool to raise awareness on how school meal programs help contribute to child health, and country prosperity.

**Partners Voices (NGOs, Private Sector, Academia, Other):**

From 2022 to 2024, most partners noted increased investments in their time and money, especially in the areas of nutrition education, Home-Grown School Feeding, and literacy support.

*There are things that hinder or prevent partners from supporting the quality of government-owned school meal programs, including:*

- Lack of sufficient and predictable budgets.
- Frequent turnover of local staff and officials leading to stagnated program progress.
- Lack of infrastructure to support program implementation (stores, kitchens, running water etc.).
- Climate change and challenges with sustainable growing practices.
- Absence of nutritionists to ensure dietary quality.

*There are things that help partners support the quality of government-owned school meal programs, including:*

- Predictable, multi-year funding.
- Political will shown through financial and budget support, and policy alignment.
- Multi-sectoral and ministerial collaboration.
- More flexibility from both partners and governments in order to address local needs.
- Increase evidence and data generation on the benefit of school meal programs.
- Involvement of the private sector to increase capacity and innovation to address key challenges, such as the impacts of climate change.

*Partner support to government-owned school meal programs already contribute to food systems*



*transformation in the following ways which should continue to be supported and scaled up:*

- Promotion of highly nutritious food to shape children’s dietary behaviours that they are likely to carry over into adulthood by involving dietitians.
- Inclusion of climate-smart, traditional and nutritious foods in school menus in line with the nutritional requirements of schoolchildren.
- Developing school gardens that engage children to mobilize their peers, parents, and communities.
- Training of key stakeholders in food and nutrition education.
- Capacity building for local producers that supply food to the school feeding program.

*For partner support to government-owned school meal programs to advance food systems transformation, the following should be prioritized:*

- More attention on using school meal programs to drive transformation on farms and the adoption of improved agricultural technologies.
- Where possible and contextually appropriate, adopt more nutritious staple crops that are neglected, indigenous, and biofortified.
- Support governments in food processing, fortification and packaging and provide training and technical assistance.
- Support building the capacity of local aggregation and packaging systems that go beyond just school feeding. This would enable more local purchasing.
- Make nutritious foods exciting through marketing, celebrity chefs, endorsements, artists, etc.
- Increase educational opportunities for children, parents, and stakeholders to better understand the importance of nutritious school meals.
- Continue to strengthen international alliances and coalitions to advocate for increased support from governments.
- Articulating across the political spectrum how school meals is a low-hanging fruit to support food systems transformation.

*Other issues that partners feel need attention in the coming year include:*

- Capacity building for government stakeholders on monitoring and data management to improve informed decision making processes, including establishing/improving data systems that are centralized.
- Set national targets for school meals (including nutrition goals).
- Improve governance on domestic financing and capture all partner investments to have a more complete picture of funding gaps.



- Addressing unpaid women’s labor (cooks and caterers particularly) in low income countries. This has the potential to further increase the vulnerabilities of women and girls. This can be done by:
  - Advocating for policy frameworks sensitive to gender.
  - Systematically tracking and researching unpaid work, costing this labor and contribution to school feeding programs.
  - Engaging Ministries of gender and other stakeholders to ensure gender sensitive school feeding programs.
- Ensure school feeding is reaching all marginalized groups.
- School meal programs to be government-owned should be paid for by governments, and not rely on contributions from vulnerable communities.
- Recognizing that school meals are not only a plate of food. They must consider other complementary interventions to ensure a holistic approach, including addressing water and sanitation, etc.

*Partners will be sharing the communiqué with the following stakeholders, using it in the following ways:*

- It will be used to guide school meal program surveys/evaluations to understand the relevance, effectiveness, outcomes, impact and recommendations for improvement, scaling up, and future programming and adaptability.
- It will be shared with local communities via workshops, publications and via digital channels to support collaboration.
- It will be shared with other funders and donors and with national governments to advocate for the inclusion of nutrition policies for school feeding.

**Conclusion:**

The 24th Global Child Nutrition Forum recognizes that school meal programs saw an increase in the quality of their programs from 2022 to 2024 and are already contributing to food systems transformation. The Forum also recognizes the need to put in place more sustainable and resilient systems that can supply more – and more nutritious food for our school children through holistic approaches to transformation and collaboration between all school meals stakeholders. Government representatives and partners will be sharing the communiqué to take further action in all areas as recommended.