

## WFP SCHOOL MEALS POLICY UPDATE

### 1. Introduction

1. Over the past 20 years, governments and development partners have recognized the power of school meal programmes in supporting education and health outcomes for children, particularly girls, contributing to human capital development and economic growth, while also helping countries to respond to shocks.
2. The world is facing an unprecedented food crisis fuelled by escalating conflicts, extreme climate events and economic shocks and is still recovering from the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Progress towards most Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has stalled or reversed.
3. Scaling up school meal programmes could help revive progress towards the SDGs, unite a fragmented multilateral system and change the lives of millions of children and their families. Governments are stepping up and supporting this agenda, including through increased domestic contributions, even as fiscal space shrinks and international funding decreases.
4. For WFP, this represents a unique opportunity. With WFP recognized as a leader in emergency response and logistics, school meals is the third area where it plays a global leadership role. The organization has 60 years of experience in supporting governments with school meal programmes, during which time 50 countries<sup>1</sup> have transitioned to self-reliant programmes, making school meals one of WFP's most important tools in changing lives in a sustainable way.
5. This revised policy, which supersedes the 2013 version,<sup>2</sup> aims to institutionalize WFP's leadership role, introducing the School Meals Coalition as the driving force behind global efforts, and to sharpen WFP's approach to school meals based on the latest evidence and good practice. It lays out for governments, partners and WFP staff what to expect from WFP, what WFP's priorities and roles will be, and how WFP plans to change its way of working on school meals. The policy also responds to the findings and recommendations of a strategic evaluation carried out by WFP in 2021.<sup>3</sup>
6. As this policy is implemented, three strategic shifts are expected:
  - i) WFP will reinforce its ways of working and acting in partnership; sharpen its advocacy, convening and influencing capacities; and act as a catalyst and facilitator of global, regional and country efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> WFP internal analysis and data (unpublished.)

<sup>2</sup> WFP. 2013. *Revised School Feeding Policy: Promoting innovation to achieve national ownership.*

<sup>3</sup> WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of the Contribution of School Feeding Activities to the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.*

- ii) WFP will strengthen its work with governments, increasing the sustainability and institutionalization of its efforts through a better understanding of national priorities and challenges, and a systematic approach to strengthening national systems.
  - iii) WFP will improve the way it delivers school meal programmes, ensuring better integration, coherence and quality of programme delivery, a stronger focus on the roles of diet and lifestyle on well-being and nutrition outcomes, increased capacities to act in humanitarian and fragile settings, and a stronger approach to food system transformation and climate action.
7. WFP's policy on school meals has evolved and matured over 20 years making this one of its best documented and evidence-based programme areas (see figure 1). The first part of this policy document lays out the context for the update. The second part presents the latest consensus on the benefits of school meals as a multisectoral platform that can be used to respond to a range of systemic challenges. The final part of the document outlines WFP's role and value added in school meal programmes and its commitments for the future.

## 2. From crises to a global coalition: the evolution of a policy priority

### 2.1 Rethinking school meals: how the 2008 financial crisis led to a decade of growth in school meal programmes worldwide, from 2009 to 2019

8. In 2009, the World Bank and WFP published *Rethinking School Feeding*<sup>4</sup> in response to governments' increased interest in school meals after the 2008 global financial crisis. This landmark report established that school meal programmes were not only powerful safety nets that supported the most vulnerable people and communities during crises, but also a long-term investment in human capital, with positive implications for education and nutrition outcomes and for local economic development.
9. The findings of the report led to the adoption of WFP's school feeding policy<sup>5</sup> in 2009, which was updated in 2013<sup>6</sup> following a policy evaluation.<sup>7</sup>
10. The 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015, connected school meals to at least eight SDGs.<sup>8</sup>
11. In 2017, the World Bank's *Disease Control Priorities*<sup>9</sup> introduced a paradigm shift: while confirming that the first 1,000 days of a child's life were critical, the report concluded that greater investment was also needed in the following 7,000 days, leading to calls for an "8,000 days approach" to child development. The report concluded that a health and nutrition package delivered through schools, of which school meals is a key component, is essential in helping children and adolescents to achieve their full potential.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D.A.P. Bundy and others. 2009. *Rethinking School Feeding: Social Safety Nets, Child Development and the Education Sector*.

<sup>5</sup> "WFP School Feeding Policy" (WFP/EB.2/2009/4-A).

<sup>6</sup> WFP. 2013. *Revised School Feeding Policy: Promoting innovation to achieve national ownership*.

<sup>7</sup> WFP. 2011. *WFP's School Feeding Policy: A Policy Evaluation Vol. I Full Report*.

<sup>8</sup> Related to SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

<sup>9</sup> D.A.P. Bundy and others. 2017. *Child and Adolescent Health and Development. Disease Control Priorities (third edition), Volume 8*.

<sup>10</sup> Components of the package include school meals, deworming, supplementation, vaccination, vision screening, malaria control, menstrual hygiene management, nutrition education, water, sanitation and hygiene, and oral health.

12. WFP's 2020 *State of School Feeding Worldwide* estimated that national school meal programmes had reached a record 388 million children.<sup>11</sup> This achievement was the result of a decade of action by governments and development partners, including efforts led by the WFP Centre of Excellence Against Hunger in Brazil,<sup>12</sup> regional mobilization by the African Union and in Latin America, and the annual school meals forum of the Global Child Nutrition Foundation.
13. In early 2020, WFP launched its ten-year school feeding strategy, which was based on a growing body of evidence on school meals.<sup>13</sup> However, the plans came to a sudden halt when the COVID-19 pandemic struck just months after the strategy had been introduced.

## **2.2 The COVID-19 pandemic, the School Meals Coalition and the resurgence of school meal programmes worldwide, from 2020 to the present**

14. The closure of schools in 2020 exacerbated the global learning crisis<sup>14</sup> and deprived 1.6 billion children of access to education. It also deprived 370 million children of school meals,<sup>15</sup> jeopardizing the learning, health and nutrition of future generations.
15. In 2021, supported by WFP, a group of countries aimed to re-establish and scale up school meal programmes worldwide. Their efforts culminated in the launch of the School Meals Coalition during the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit, initially led by France and Finland, with Brazil joining in 2023.
16. The coalition has achieved notable gains. At present, it comprises 97 Member States and 124 development partners, all of whom are working together to ensure that every child receives a healthy and nutritious daily meal in school by 2030. Functioning as an innovative “network of networks” and a highly effective vehicle for multilateral action,<sup>16</sup> the coalition supports Member States in meeting their school meal commitments and addressing implementation bottlenecks through partner-led initiatives.
17. There has been a fundamental shift in the level of political support for school meals, as documented in WFP's 2022 *State of School Feeding Worldwide* report. Between 2020 and 2022, countries expanded their programmes to feed an additional 30 million children, providing meals for 418 million schoolchildren every day. Global annual investment in school meals increased by USD 5 billion to USD 48 billion over the same period.<sup>17</sup> School meals are expanding in all the regions in which WFP operates, with 98 percent of their costs being covered by domestic budgets.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> WFP. 2020. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020*.

<sup>12</sup> The Centre of Excellence Against Hunger was established in 2011 in partnership with the Government of Brazil.

<sup>13</sup> WFP. 2020. *A Chance for every Schoolchild: Partnering to scale up School Health and Nutrition for Human Capital. WFP School Feeding Strategy 2020–2030*.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and WFP. 2023. *Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world*.

<sup>15</sup> WFP. 2020. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020*.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland. 2023. *Review of the process leading to the formation of the School Meals Coalition (SMC)*.

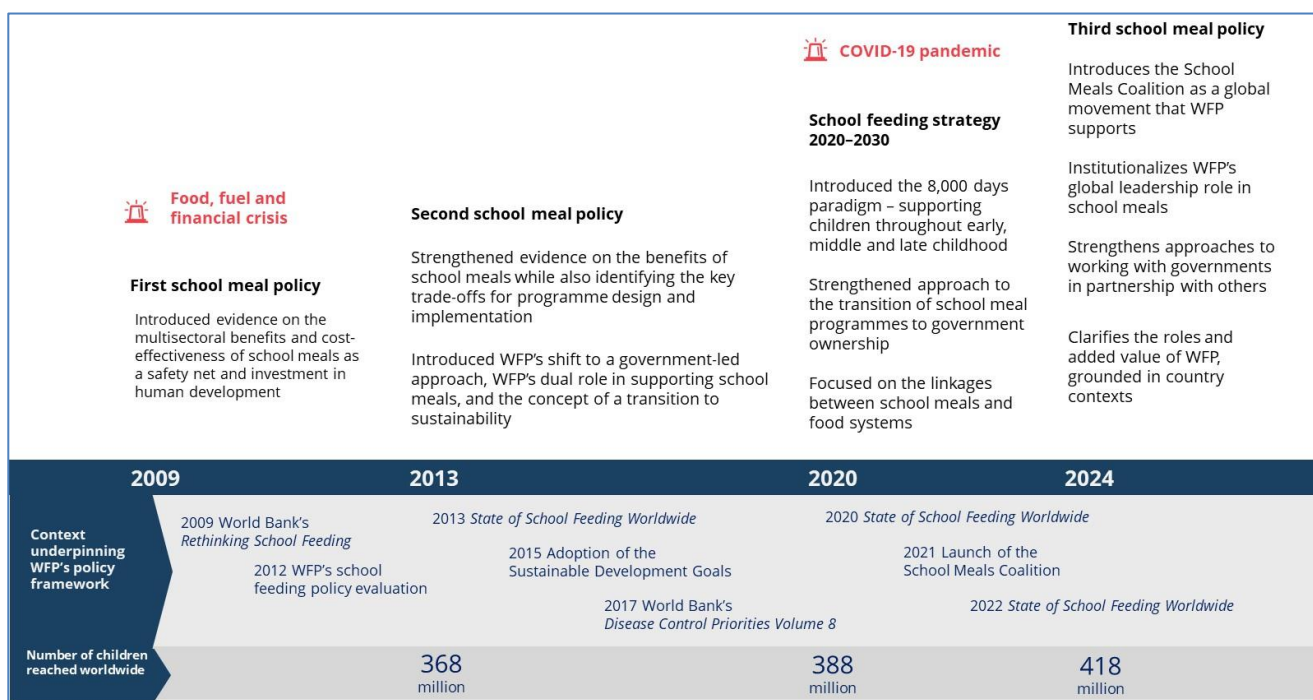
<sup>17</sup> WFP. 2022. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

### 2.3 Current challenges to improving and expanding school meal programmes

18. While progress has been extensive, it has also been uneven. Approximately 18 percent of schoolchildren in low-income countries receive school meals, compared with 39 percent in lower-middle-income countries and 48 percent in upper-middle-income countries.<sup>19</sup> Coverage is often lowest where the need is the greatest. A more ambitious global effort is needed to expand the fiscal space of low-income countries and increase their capacity to design, implement and expand national school meal programmes.
19. The impetus for an expanded reach of and inclusive access to school meal programming calls for an update to WFP's school meals policy. As a recognized leader in this field and a trusted government partner, WFP is at the heart of renewed engagement in school meals. Through its role as the Secretariat for the School Meals Coalition, WFP has become the facilitator of an ecosystem comprising more than 100 organizations, all of which are pooling their resources and supporting national school meal programmes. With this responsibility comes increased expectations of the organization, and the extent to which WFP can fulfil this broader role will determine whether it can support countries in ushering in another decade of growth and transformation.

**Figure 1: Evolution of WFP's school meals policy landscape**



### 3. Recognizing the multiple cross-sectoral benefits of school meal programmes

20. Current evidence suggests that school meal programmes generate results in at least five interconnected sectors: health, nutrition and education, which can promote gender equality outcomes and increase returns on human capital development; and social protection and local agriculture, which increase returns on community investment. School meals are also an effective instrument during and after shocks and emergencies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

21. Other positive impacts – such as those related to post-conflict reconstruction, community building, social cohesion, contributions to peace<sup>21</sup> and the potential for advancing climate action<sup>22</sup> – are still being quantified, but are likely to significantly increase the overall rate of return.
22. In practice, governments often pursue multiple policy objectives in their programmes, with nutrition, education and social protection among the most commonly reported aims.<sup>23</sup> The numerous and potentially multiplying benefits of school meals make them a particularly worthwhile investment in the school health and nutrition integrated package, with an estimated economic return of between USD 7 and USD 35 for every dollar invested.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1 Social protection

23. At the global level, school meals are among the most widespread and significant social protection interventions, considered by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as one of the strategies for providing income security for children.<sup>25</sup> School meals increase the resilience of children and families facing poverty, food insecurity, social exclusion and other forms of discrimination. They provide nutrition, while protecting children's access to education and increasing the disposable income available to families.
24. In times of stability, governments regard school meals as an important intervention for poverty alleviation, with 73 percent of countries mentioning income transfer as an objective for their programmes.<sup>26</sup> Feeding children at school eases the pressure on household budgets: school meals represent between 8 and 16 percent of the average income of the poorest households.<sup>27</sup> As this benefit is effective per child, households gain more benefit when they have more children going to school.
25. Globally, women provide more than three quarters of unpaid care work, affecting human capital development and economic growth potential.<sup>28</sup> When children are in school, women can pursue income-generating opportunities that contribute to long-term household income and food security.

### 3.2 Education and gender equality

26. Almost all the types of school meal programme reported in the literature demonstrate a positive impact on school enrolment and attendance, especially among girls.<sup>29</sup> This applies to both school meals and take-home rations, with greater benefits for girls, particularly when both modalities are offered together at school.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> WFP. 2022. *Peace, Conflict and School Feeding: Technical Briefing Note* (unpublished).

<sup>22</sup> S. Pastorino and others. 2023. *School meals and food systems: Rethinking the consequences for climate, environment, biodiversity, and food sovereignty*.

<sup>23</sup> World Bank. 2024. *School Meals, Social Protection and Human Development: Revisiting Trends, Evidence, and Practices in South Asia and Beyond*.

<sup>24</sup> S. Verguet and others. 2020. *The Broader Economic Value of School Feeding Programs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Estimating the Multi-Sectoral Returns to Public Health, Human Capital, Social Protection, and the Local Economy*. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2020;8(December):19.

<sup>25</sup> ILO. 2012. *Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)*, Para. 5(b).

<sup>26</sup> World Bank. 2024. *School Meals, Social Protection and Human Development: Revisiting Trends, Evidence, and Practices in South Asia and Beyond*.

<sup>27</sup> Education Commission, School Meals Coalition and Sustainable Financing Initiative. 2022. *School Meals Programmes and the Education Crisis: A Financial Landscape Analysis*. Author's own analysis.

<sup>28</sup> ILO. 2018. *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*.

<sup>29</sup> A.U. Ahmed and C. del Ninno. 2002. *The Food for Education Program in Bangladesh: An Evaluation of Its Impact on Educational Attainment and Food Security*. Discussion Paper no. 138. International Food Policy Research Institute.

<sup>30</sup> A. Gelli, U. Meir and F. Espejo. 2007. *Does Provision of Food in School Increase Girls' Enrollment? Evidence from Schools in Sub-Saharan Africa*. *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 28(2): 149–155.

27. School meals can boost children's ability to concentrate, participate and learn. Analysis indicates that the return on school meal programmes ranks alongside such interventions as those for early childhood development, better-qualified teachers and better teaching.<sup>31</sup>
28. The benefits of school meal programmes are particularly significant for girls and children who are vulnerable to multiple forms of exclusion and discrimination.<sup>32</sup> School meals can help to improve girls' level of education, reducing the risk of early and forced marriage and early pregnancy. Data from 32 sub-Saharan countries showed that in-school meals combined with take-home rations increased the enrolment rate of girls by 12 percent.<sup>33</sup>
29. A 2019 UNESCO review found that school meal programming was one of the two interventions with the greatest impact on equity and inclusion in education, the other being conditional cash transfers.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.3 Health and nutrition

30. The school health and nutrition package, of which school meals are a key pillar, can build on the substantial investments that governments already make in the first 1,000 days of a child's life by consolidating early gains and providing an opportunity for catch-up growth from early childhood into the next 7,000 days.<sup>35</sup> School meals can support weight and height gain, as evidenced by a Cochrane systematic review that analysed three randomized control trials in Jamaica, Kenya and China.<sup>36</sup> Cumulative exposure to health-promoting interventions during adolescence, including daily school meals, has been associated with improvements in future child linear growth, as seen in India following decades of its Mid-Day Meal scheme.<sup>37</sup>
31. Nutritious and diverse school menus can improve the macro- and micronutrient adequacy of a child's diet, including through fortified foods, and reduce anaemia in girls by 20 percent.<sup>38</sup> For physiological reasons, women and girls are more likely to experience anaemia than men and boys, with almost one in five adolescent girls affected.<sup>39</sup> Aligned with complementary programming on healthy diets and food habits, and on health and hygiene practices, including sexual and reproductive health, school meals have the potential to accelerate progress in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
32. High-quality school meal programmes are associated with increased intake of healthy foods, which benefits disadvantaged children in particular.<sup>40</sup> The foundations of dietary preferences and social attitudes related to food are laid during the early school years and carried into adulthood. This makes school meal programmes, together with nutrition education, physical activity and social and behaviour change communication, an excellent

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<sup>31</sup> N. Angrist and others. 2020. *How to Improve Education Outcomes Most Efficiently? A Comparison of 150 Interventions Using the New Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling Metric*. Policy Research Working Paper 9450.

<sup>32</sup> Education Commission, School Meals Coalition and Sustainable Financing Initiative. 2022. *School Meals Programmes and the Education Crisis: A Financial Landscape Analysis*.

<sup>33</sup> A. Gelli, U. Meir and F. Espejo. 2007. *Does Provision of Food in School Increase Girls' Enrollment? Evidence from Schools in Sub-Saharan Africa*. *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 28(2): 149–155.

<sup>34</sup> UNESCO. 2019. *Making evaluation work for the achievement of SDG 4 Target 5: Equality and inclusion in education*.

<sup>35</sup> D.A.P. Bundy and others. 2018. *Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies*.

<sup>36</sup> B. Kristjansson and others. 2007. *School feeding for improving the physical and psychosocial health of disadvantaged students (Review)*. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, article number CD004676.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> S. Adelman and others. 2019. *School Feeding Reduces Anemia Prevalence in Adolescent Girls and Other Vulnerable Household Members in a Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial in Uganda*. *Journal of Nutrition*, 149(4): 659–666.

<sup>39</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP. 2023. *Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

opportunity to foster children’s healthy eating habits, increasing the potential to address some of the long-term determinants of malnutrition and enhancing potential health outcomes of future generations.

### **3.4 Local agriculture and food systems**

33. School meals account for 70 percent of publicly managed food systems. There is an opportunity to leverage food procurement to enhance and shorten local value chains and influence the ways in which food is produced, processed stored and consumed, transforming food systems on a large scale.<sup>41</sup>
34. Home-grown school meal approaches provide a stable market for smallholder farmers, which can increase incomes and support local employment by creating jobs in the production, processing, distribution and preparation of food.
35. Safe, diverse and nutritious food, including traditional and indigenous foods – sourced locally and produced using regenerative agricultural practices through efficient, climate-resilient value chains that encourage equitable farming practices for men, women and young people – enhances the food security of schoolchildren and their communities.
36. Through intentional design, these programmes offer an opportunity to focus on young people, women and Indigenous people who otherwise face barriers to economic empowerment. It is estimated that school meal programmes have directly created 4 million jobs in 85 countries,<sup>42</sup> with 32 percent of programmes reporting a focus on creating jobs for women and 20 percent a focus on young people’s employment.<sup>43</sup>
37. If linked to healthier and more sustainable food habits in schools – including nutritious and diverse menus, clean cooking solutions and energy efficiency, minimal food and packaging waste, gender equality along the food chain value, and holistic education on food – children can become agents of change, embracing such habits and influencing the dietary preferences and gender-based stereotypes related to roles in food value chains for their families and communities in the short and long terms.

### **3.5 Responding to shocks and emergencies**

38. In times of shock and crisis, when food insecurity tends to be higher, governments and other actors, including WFP, can use school meal programmes to respond while integrating them into broader national social safety net programmes.<sup>44</sup>
39. School meals can be used to meet basic food needs, reduce short-term hunger, support continuity of education, provide an income transfer to parents and caregivers and act as an important incentive for sending children to school, especially girls, while helping to strengthen the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. In India, for example, the impacts of drought on children’s nutrition have been entirely compensated for by the Mid-Day Meal scheme.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> S. Pastorino and others. 2023. *School meals and food systems: Rethinking the consequences for climate, environment, biodiversity, and food sovereignty*.

<sup>42</sup> WFP. 2022. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022*.

<sup>43</sup> Global Child Nutrition Foundation. 2022. *School Meal Programs Around the World: Results from the 2021 Global Survey of School Meal Programs*.

<sup>44</sup> D.A.P. Bundy and others. 2018. *Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies*.

<sup>45</sup> World Bank. 2024. *School Meals, Social Protection and Human Development: Revisiting Trends, Evidence, and Practices in South Asia and beyond*.

40. Conflict and violence disrupt the provision of basic services, including education, which affects children's health, food security and protection, especially for girls. School meals can support the reopening of schools in the aftermath of conflict. When accompanied by measures to mitigate the protection and conflict sensitivity risks associated with the reopening of schools in post-conflict settings, such as family separation, early child and forced marriage, child labour and gender-based or sexual violence, school meals can provide children with a sense of normality and create more conducive conditions for learning, thereby improving educational outcomes.<sup>46</sup>

## **4. Consolidating WFP's enhanced role: how WFP will step up support for countries in improving their programmes**

### **4.1 WFP's vision and ambition**

41. WFP aligns itself with the vision of the 97 Member States who have joined the School Meals Coalition: ensuring that all children have access to healthy and nutritious meals in school. WFP will continue to shift to nationally owned and sustainable programmes that are home-grown and integrated into a broader package of health and nutrition services. Specifically, WFP will work with governments and partners to support an estimated 100 million children living in extreme poverty and hunger in obtaining access to safe, diverse and nutritious meals at school.<sup>47</sup>
42. WFP will work to ensure that children who are vulnerable to food insecurity and other intersecting dimensions of poverty and exclusion are prioritized. It will provide technical assistance to governments on the trade-offs among different approaches to school meal programming, including in relation to targeting and eligibility that ensure equitable access for girls, children with disabilities, Indigenous children and other children facing barriers to participation.
43. WFP's support for school meal programming contributes to strategic outcomes 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the WFP strategic plan for 2022–2025.<sup>48</sup> WFP's approach is aligned with current strategies and policies.<sup>49</sup>

### **4.2 WFP's policy objectives**

44. The following five objectives are considered corporate in that they will be attained through investments and action at the global, regional and country levels.
45. At the country level, WFP does not expect to achieve all the objectives at the same time or in the same way. In some cases, WFP's pathway to achieving the objectives will be through policy engagement and technical support only. In other cases, WFP will be more involved in school meal operations, reaching children directly. This is because, while promoting national ownership is the overarching goal of WFP assistance, not all countries are ready for that in the short or medium term. Section 3.3 details how action in WFP's different focus areas will help to achieve these objectives.

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<sup>46</sup> WFP. 2022. *Peace, Conflict and School Feeding: Technical Briefing Note* (unpublished).

<sup>47</sup> D.A.P. Bundy and others. *Re-estimating global school feeding program targets: How has the size of the global population of vulnerable school-age children changed post-COVID pandemic.* (pending publication.)

<sup>48</sup> WFP. 2022. *WFP strategic plan (2022–2025)*.

<sup>49</sup> The forthcoming nutrition strategy to improve diets and address malnutrition for 2024–2030, as well as the gender policy (2022), the disability and inclusion roadmap (2020), the climate change policy (2017), the local and regional food procurement policy (2023), the cash policy (2023), the social protection and safety nets policy (2022), the country capacity strengthening policy (2022), the South–South and triangular cooperation policy (2023), the protection and accountability policy (2020), and WFP's role in peacebuilding in transition settings (2014).



46. WFP will continue to focus on primary school-aged children as the main target group for its operations. However, in certain settings, with the right partners and in accordance with humanitarian principles, WFP will support pre-primary and secondary schoolchildren – including by addressing the barriers faced by adolescent girls and boys in obtaining access to education – and children out of school or in schools that operate without government oversight.<sup>50</sup>

**Objective 1: Support governments in expanding the scale and quality of nationally owned school meal programmes as platforms for human capital development and inclusion**

47. WFP will continue its shift from being an implementer of programmes to becoming an enabler of country efforts, with a growing part of its portfolio dedicated to supporting governments in scaling up inclusive, nationally owned school meal programmes.
48. By supporting governments in designing school meal programmes that are often considered part of social protection, WFP can help to promote outcomes that protect children and families and help to combat poverty, food insecurity, social exclusion and other forms of discrimination. School meals can be linked to other social assistance programmes, such as scholarships, unconditional transfers and public works, which help to expand their impact.<sup>51</sup>
49. To enhance children’s ability to learn and increase their chances of thriving WFP will work with partners across sectors to support a comprehensive health and nutrition package and will advocate the inclusion of that package in sectoral plans. The package includes deworming, nutrition supplementation, vaccination against common preventable diseases, vision screening, malaria control, cash incentives, water, sanitation and hygiene services, including menstrual hygiene, sexual and reproductive health services, and education on healthy diets.
50. WFP will continue to promote equitable access to diverse and nutritious meals for girls and boys by identifying their specific needs and barriers to education. WFP will consider the intersectional dimensions of poverty and exclusion – sex, gender, disability, indigeneity, ethnicity, migration and displacement – by assessing and addressing protection risks such as early, child and forced marriage, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, sexual exploitation and abuse, child labour and recruitment into armed groups.

**Objective 2: Enhance children’s nutrition, health and well-being**

51. By focusing on the food supply, the food environment and consumer behaviour, WFP’s nutrition strategy identifies school meals as a platform for promoting healthier diets and addressing issues related to food access, affordability and diversity.<sup>52</sup>
52. WFP-supported tools, such as Fill the Nutrient Gap analysis, will be used to identify the barriers to healthier diets and the interventions that will increase access to nutritious foods. In addition, WFP will work on dismantling social norms related to food production, preparation and consumption practices for women, men, girls and boys, while increasing the knowledge of, and demand for, healthier foods through behaviour change initiatives.
53. WFP will work with partners to support the roll-out of low-cost solutions that enhance the nutritional value of school meals, with a focus on food fortification and the introduction of

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<sup>50</sup> While WFP generally supports school meal programmes in public schools that are established by the state, deciding whether to engage with other schools that are part of the formal education system (e.g., community-based education), that operate without government oversight or that are in areas controlled by non-state armed groups, or with children who are out of school children, requires careful consideration and management of trade-offs with the humanitarian principles.

<sup>51</sup> [“Update of WFP’s Safety Nets Policy: The Role of Food Assistance in Social Protection”](#) (WFP/EB.A/2012/5-A).

<sup>52</sup> WFP. forthcoming. Nutrition strategy.

practical tools to measure the nutritional quality of school meals. WFP will also measure the impact that these programmes have on improving equitable access to and control over safe, diverse and nutritious foods by individuals in communities, especially those facing intersecting forms of discrimination.

**Objective 3: Support food system transformation and climate action**

54. WFP will support the design of planet-friendly school meal programmes and policies that leverage local procurement to promote shorter, more sustainable and inclusive value chains for diverse, culturally appropriate and nutritious food.
55. The Rome-based agencies have a special role in this area. By working together, FAO, IFAD and WFP can support home-grown approaches and provide smallholder farmers and other local actors involved in the food value chain, particularly women, young people and Indigenous people, with access to information, innovative productive practices, inputs, finance and reliable markets. Recognizing the integral role that women play in the food value chain and, in particular, in food production and preparation, primarily as unpaid family labour, WFP can concurrently work to dismantle gender-based stereotypes affecting food-related livelihoods and responsibilities in schools, households and communities.
56. With partners, WFP will promote renewable energy and clean cooking solutions in schools through awareness raising, technical assistance and the introduction of innovative cooking solutions. It will promote access to electricity for refrigeration to reduce food losses, and irrigation for school gardens.

**Objective 4: Support responses to shocks and emergencies**

57. Considering the increase in the scale, duration and intensity of emergencies, WFP will help governments to use school meal programmes as a tool for preparing and responding, before, during and after shocks. WFP will ensure that activities are based on local circumstances and protection and conflict analysis and will strengthen partnerships with education and child protection actors on the design and implementation of risk prevention and mitigation measures.
58. When working in conflict-affected or fragile settings, WFP will deploy a conflict-sensitive approach to school meals, going beyond the “do no harm” approach and capitalizing on opportunities to mitigate the risks of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, while contributing to peace, social cohesion and child protection.
59. Through school meals, WFP will contribute to the operationalization of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and deploy its available resources, programmatic expertise and operational capacities to ensure that no child is “left behind”. WFP will work with partners to deliver an integrated and inclusive package of support. It will also consider approaches for ensuring that children facing intersecting forms of discrimination, including those whose education has been disrupted – such as crisis-affected children, migrants and refugee children, and children with disabilities – are prioritized.

**4.3 WFP’s unique contribution to the school meals agenda and its new strategic framework**

60. Unlike other programmatic areas in the changing lives space, where WFP is an important but supportive actor, in school meals, WFP is the point of reference globally, regionally and at the country level, where it is – in most cases – the trusted source of information and expertise for governments and partners. Drawing on 60 years of experience with supporting more than 100 governments, and building on the recent momentum, this policy renews WFP’s commitment to providing global leadership on the school meals agenda.
61. While WFP will continue to champion this agenda globally, it will not and cannot do everything on its own. In fact, to make progress, governments and communities require a

range of partners that can provide multisectoral and integrated support in various technical areas. Thus, leadership in this case means that WFP will actively work to engage others in school meals, drawing on the strengths and expertise of partners, identifying gaps, convening different actors and calling for collective solutions to the challenges identified.

62. WFP will continue its new approach to partnership for school meals by building on the success of the School Meals Coalition, which has brought together more than 100 organizations.<sup>53</sup> It will maintain and set up strategic relationships with stakeholders that add value in different sectors, including but not limited to other United Nations entities such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Health Organization; international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the African Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank; sectoral partners such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education; the private sector and philanthropist such as Dubai Cares, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Novo Nordisk Foundation; and academia, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations.
63. In a resource-constrained environment, WFP will prioritize actions according to the strategic framework outlined in the following paragraphs, which introduces three strategic roles. Following a corporate approach, WFP will leverage capacity and assets at the global, regional and country levels according to the setting, deciding whether to take direct or indirect action depending on its comparative advantages and the availability of partners.

***Strategic role 1: Hosting the School Meals Coalition and helping to create a global movement of support***

64. Three years after the creation of the School Meals Coalition, and having proven its ability to generate global momentum, WFP will support the growth of this thriving ecosystem. Under the guidance of the coalition co-chairs, WFP will continue to host the Secretariat of the School Meals Coalition, providing dedicated and stable leadership as it supports countries at all income levels. The coalition will benefit from WFP's political commitment at the highest levels, its global infrastructure and its role as a recognized, credible and agile facilitator of the work of partners.
  - Success in this role means:
    - an increased number of countries at all income levels committing to the school meals agenda, and increased collaboration among them, breaking the mindset of "North versus South" or "developed versus developing" countries;
    - an increased number of partners supporting governments with better technical assistance and policy support following a multisectoral approach; and
    - strengthened regional partners that lead in policy and priority setting, including the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Southern African Development Community, the African Union Development Agency, the Eastern African Community and others.
  - Major strategic shifts and learning:
    - *Connecting across silos and positioning school meals as a multisectoral platform*: it takes collaboration among several sectors to make school meal programmes work and no single sector is fully and totally the owner of the school meals agenda. This is a strength because sectors are compelled to work together towards outcomes that are mutually beneficial, but also a challenge because

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<sup>53</sup> The full list of partners in the School Meals Coalition can be found at [Members and Partners - School Meals Coalition](#).

multisectoral coordination is very challenging. WFP will support multisector action through the large network of governments and partners demonstrating that joint progress is possible.

- *Supporting partners, including by channelling resources to them, so that they can lead in critical areas:* where WFP does not have expertise, and in countries where it is not present, it will work to enable others to provide support. This includes supporting the four coalition initiatives that focus on research, financing, data and localization with funding, technical support and coordination.<sup>54</sup> The expertise and technical assistance of these initiatives – which are themselves networks of partners – are pooled and made available to governments at all income levels, thereby increasing the breadth of support for countries that are committed to implementing school meal programmes.

***Strategic role 2: Providing technical assistance and policy support to governments so they can run sustainable, nationally owned programmes***

65. In stable low- and lower-middle-income countries, WFP will shift to an enabling role responding to increasing government demand for nationally owned and operated school meal programmes. In these countries, WFP will engage with national governments to develop time-bound national targets and sustainable handover strategies, leading to a gradual decrease in WFP operational caseloads and an increase in government-supported caseloads.

66. WFP has already proved its ability to make this strategic shift, but much more needs to be done. WFP's efforts to position school meals globally, including through the School Meals Coalition, have mobilized political will, which in turn has led to an increase in domestic resource allocations for school meals in all continents and to more countries having national school meal policies (see figure 2). WFP will work with partners, harness its extensive country network and leverage assets such as the Centre of Excellence Against Hunger in Brazil to provide better technical assistance. WFP's technical and policy support has already improved the quality of life of 107 million schoolchildren in 77 countries (see figure 3).<sup>55</sup>

➤ Success in this role means:

- decreased direct WFP assistance for children in stable low- and lower-middle-income countries, leading to lower WFP caseloads;
- an increased number of children reached by nationally owned, funded and operated programmes, and increased domestic funding for those programmes; and
- increased resources and numbers of partners providing high-quality and integrated technical assistance to governments.

➤ Major strategic shifts and learning:

- *Channelling the right technical support and capabilities to countries, at the right time:* adopting a demand-led approach, WFP will work with partners in the School Meals Coalition and beyond to provide governments with support for designing and implementing gender-responsive and climate- and nutrition-sensitive policies and legal frameworks; strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and leadership; designing evidence-based, home-grown and planet-friendly programmes that are equitable, inclusive, culturally adapted and

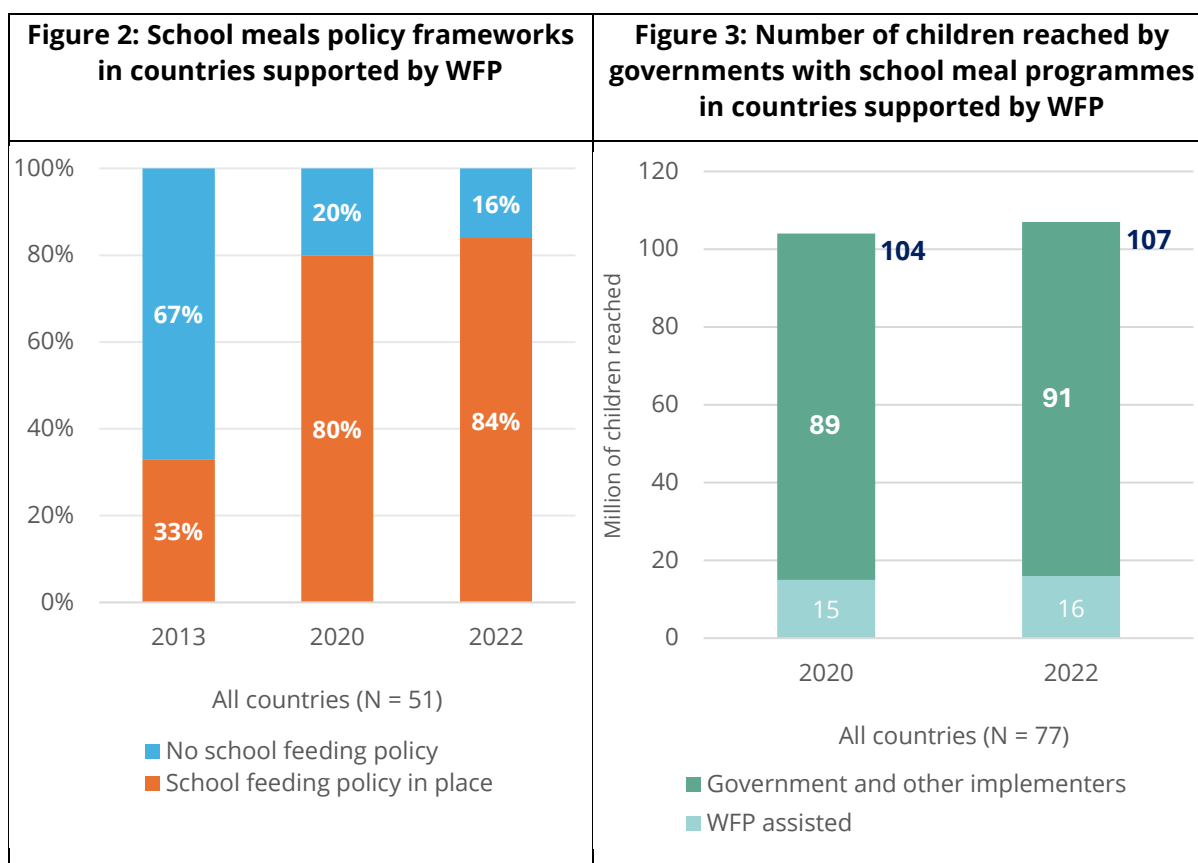
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<sup>54</sup> The four initiatives are the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, the Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition, the Data and Monitoring Initiative, and the Cities Feeding the Future Initiative.

<sup>55</sup> WFP. 2022. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022*.

sustainable; and ensuring that programmes can anticipate and adapt to shocks and provide timely and effective response during and in the aftermath of shocks. The country-to-country sharing of expertise and South-South and triangular cooperation are the coalition's preferred modes of collaboration and will continue to be supported by WFP.

- *Supporting countries in expanding the fiscal space and innovative sources of funding:* WFP will enable partners to support countries in developing long-term, sustainable financing plans and tools for costing, accounting and budgeting that improve cost-effectiveness and sustainability. It will help countries explore options for mobilizing domestic and external finance to fill funding gaps.
- *Strengthening WFP's capacities for systems strengthening and upstream policy work:* several evaluations have pointed to the weak capacities of WFP country offices to engage with and influence the national and subnational systems within which school meal programmes are embedded, and those capacities will be strengthened.<sup>56</sup> WFP will also sharpen its advocacy and political engagement capacities to generate the political will and secure the necessary budgets at the national and subnational levels.



Source: WFP. 2022. *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2022*.

<sup>56</sup> "Synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations" (WFP/EB.A/2021/7-C); WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of the Contribution of School Feeding Activities to the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals*.

### **Strategic role 3: Providing direct operational support in low-capacity settings or countries affected by shocks and crises**

67. In countries that require operational support, including those affected by fragility, low capacity, conflict, climate extremes or other shocks, WFP will implement high-quality school meal programmes in accordance with humanitarian principles. WFP will aim to increase the coverage and quality of cost-effective and gender-, climate- and nutrition-sensitive programmes in these settings so as to reach as many children facing intersecting forms of discrimination as possible. WFP will ensure that relevant safeguarding measures are put in place to fulfil its obligations as a humanitarian actor and to make sure that staff, operations and programmes do not expose children, especially girls, to risks of harm, gender-based violence or sexual abuse.

- Success in this role means:
  - an increased number of children reached by WFP in these settings; and
  - increased quality, efficiency and integration of WFP programmes.
- Major strategic shifts and learning:
  - *Working at the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and progressively increasing national capacities to support the transition of school meal operations to national ownership:* while responding to shocks, WFP can scale up innovative approaches that promote recovery and lay the groundwork for future nationally owned school meal programmes. WFP can introduce innovative climate action that enables countries that are susceptible to climate disasters to mitigate climate-related risks and adapt to the effects of extreme weather. Depending on the situation, WFP can work with partners to provide an integrated and multisectoral package of interventions. Home-grown school meal approaches that contribute to emergency preparedness and disaster risk reduction can be piloted and expanded to act as an incentive for local smallholder farmers, particularly women and youth, to re-engage in farming after shocks and thus contribute to a faster recovery. Based on recent evaluations, WFP recognizes that emergency settings may require a special approach, which can affect programme objectives and design (see box).

#### **Box: School meals in emergency settings – lessons from evaluations**

Recent evaluations highlight that emergency settings require a special approach to ensure that school meal programmes can produce their intended results. The following points will guide WFP's policy and programming in emergency settings:

- Damaged infrastructure and limited access to water may mean that food choices are restricted to snacks, pre-packaged food or take-home rations as opposed to fresh meals. It can also influence who is able to resume schooling and when, as girls may be absent from school because of unpaid care roles or early, child and forced marriage, and boys because of labour or forced recruitment into armed groups. WFP will assess the trade-offs among the quality, quantity and nutritional benefits of meals, the value of income transfers and the type of assistance that is economically and logistically feasible.
- Compromised food production capacities and a lack of functioning markets can make it difficult to source food locally. WFP will decide the delivery model for school meals depending on feasibility, choice of modalities, targeting, investment requirements and the potential disruption of food provision.

- While school meal programmes can offer children a safe environment (which can reduce the risk of child labour, conflict-related sexual violence, recruitment into armed groups and forced marriage), these protection benefits need to be weighed against other risks. For instance, when children travel long distances to reach schools, they face risks of insecurity and violence, which may discourage parents from sending them to school. In addition, keeping food stocks in schools may increase the risk of schools becoming targets, exposing both students and school staff. WFP will conduct robust protection, conflict and gender analyses.
- Tensions within forcibly displaced populations, and with host communities, will be analysed to ensure that school meal programmes are designed with social cohesion in mind.

Sources: WFP. 2022. *School Feeding in Emergencies: a synthesis evaluation*; WFP. n.d. *The impact of school feeding in emergencies on nutrition, education, child protection, and social cohesion and peacebuilding: A global literature review. For the Evaluation Series on Emergency School Feeding in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Niger and Syria (2015–2019)* (not publicly available); WFP. 2021. *Strategic evaluation of the Contribution of School Feeding Activities to the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals*; WFP. 2022. *Peace, Conflict and School Feeding: Technical Briefing Note* (unpublished); WFP. 2020. *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school feeding around the world. A Special Report from the State of School Feeding Worldwide*.

## 5. Implementing the policy: institutional arrangements

68. WFP’s school feeding strategy was issued in 2020 and was assessed as part of the strategic evaluation of school feeding in 2021. Designed through an extensive internal and external consultation process and deemed to be robust and action-oriented by the evaluation team, the strategy provides the blueprint for the implementation of this policy and will be updated as needed. Regional implementation strategies have been designed and will support the roll-out of this revised policy, in collaboration with headquarters.

### 5.1 Data, digital innovation, research and thought leadership

69. WFP will continue to issue the *State of School Feeding Worldwide* every two years, providing quantitative and qualitative information and monitoring the progress of the School Meals Coalition. WFP will also host the coalition’s data and monitoring initiative, which includes the global school meals database containing indicators for tracking annual progress, including the new SDG 4 indicator related to school meals. WFP will partner with organizations in the school health and nutrition area with a view to expanding the knowledge and monitoring of interventions addressing the holistic needs of children’s health.
70. WFP will collaborate with the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition to promote independent, rigorous research on the effectiveness of school meals. The consortium will generate evidence to inform policy decisions. It will also document good practices and case studies and support knowledge sharing between and among governments and institutions.
71. In line with the 2013 policy and in collaboration with the World Bank, a newly revised assessment tool, “Healthy SABER”, will continue to be a mandatory requirement for all WFP school meal programmes that focus on the transition to, and technical assistance for, governments.
72. In alignment with the global assurance project,<sup>57</sup> WFP will improve the way that it tracks attendance and monitors the meals served, with data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, while managing the stock held in schools for various assistance modalities. WFP will also continue to roll out School Connect, a tool that tracks programme data, allows for the near real-time availability of data from operations for better and quicker decision-making and enhances countries’ oversight capabilities. It will support the roll-out of the School Menu Planner PLUS, a digital solution created to help governments design and

<sup>57</sup> WFP. 2024. *Update on the Global Assurance Project*.

manage nutritious, locally sourced and cost-efficient school menus through optimal procurement decisions that include the procurement of fresh produce, by automatically correlating price and nutrition values based on locally available commodities.

## **5.2 Theory of change and monitoring arrangements**

73. The theory of change for this revised policy is provided in the annex. While the 2013 policy recognized results for children and institutions, this policy includes five types of actor: children, families, communities, actors in the school feeding value chain, and governments.
74. To measure the impact of school meals on school-aged children and the broader ecosystem, WFP is committed to conducting comprehensive monitoring and supporting governments by adhering to the corporate results framework for 2022–2025 and associated commitments to disaggregate data by sex, age and disability), minimum monitoring requirements and the school feeding strategy for 2020–2030. WFP will also support the development of government monitoring systems through tools for national programmes.
75. For each strategic outcome, the corporate results framework establishes both mandatory and optional indicators, which serve as benchmarks for monitoring the effectiveness and impact of school meal activities. WFP will encourage the use of qualitative assessment tools to track the linkage between school meals and attendance rates, particularly for girls.
76. Beyond monitoring, the impact evaluation unit of the Office of Evaluation gathers data on the impact of school meals. An impact evaluation window on school-based programmes was opened in 2021 and allows country offices to receive support for conducting rigorous, randomized control trials to determine the impact of school meal programmes on students – with data disaggregated by sex, age and disability – families and value chain actors, including women and young people.



### Theory of change

