

Nourishing Children's Futures:

Scaling Community-Led School Meals with Healthy, Diversified Local Food for Every Child by **2030**.



A Policy Brief to Advance **Equitable, Locally Sourced** and **Community-Led** School Meals Programmes

All Stakeholders

Join the School Meals Coalition and make clear, time-bound commitments to develop and scale nationally-led school meals programmes. Mobilise and amplify the voices of children, parents, farmers, and educators from local communities around the world, ensuring their perspectives are reflected in the design and implementation of school meals policies and programmes.

About this Brief

This policy brief has been developed by World Vision as part of the ENOUGH Campaign, and endorsed with evidence from the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition. It presents evidence and strategic recommendations to scale sustainable, home-grown school meals programmes globally. Grounded in proven models and country case studies, it highlights school meals as a vital lever for advancing educational access, community resilience and equitable food systems. With the 2025 School Meals Coalition Summit approaching, this blueprint calls on governments, regional bodies and partnering organisations around the world to build resilient communities and ensure every child has access to nourishing, sustainable school meals by 2030.



School meals are a proven, scalable and rights-based intervention that combats child hunger, improves educational outcomes, and strengthens local food systems. When linked to local producers through Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) models, these programmes generate wide-ranging benefits—from boosting school attendance and preventing undernutrition to empowering rural economies and enhancing climate resilience.

The economic case is compelling: a seminal global study led by the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition suggests that for every dollar invested in school meals, there would be added benefits across education, and health & nutrition in the range of \$7 to \$35.¹ World Vision's 2024 policy brief further emphasises the transformative impact of universal, inclusive and sustainable school meals.²

With the 2025 School Meals Coalition Summit in Brazil approaching, there is a pivotal opportunity to bridge emergency relief and long-term development efforts, prioritise sustainable school meals programmes, and guarantee that every child has access to healthy, nutritious meals through resilient and equitable food systems.

Key messages:

- **Why:** School meals are among the most widely provided social safety nets, which promote wellbeing and educational outcomes, and stimulate local economies.
- **What:** Home-Grown School Feeding models boost local food agriculture, promote local food systems, and develop economic benefits for local communities.
- **How:** Through integrated national policies, local sourcing investments and community-driven approaches.

1. Verguet S, Limasalle P, Chakrabarti A, Husain A, Burbano C, Drake L, et al. [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. Front Public Health. 2020;8\(December\):1-9.](#)

2. World Vision, 2024. [Nourishing and Transformational: The Power of Universal, Inclusive, and Sustainable School Meals.](#)

1. School Meals: A Strategic Intervention

School meals programmes offer far-reaching benefits that transcend basic nutrition, impacting multiple sectors, including health and nutrition, education, social protection and agriculture. They are crucial for ensuring that children, particularly those in vulnerable communities, attend and stay in school, learn effectively, and receive the nourishment they need to thrive. They improve attendance, retention and academic performance, and serve as a vital safety-net during crises. They also help children and their families to develop healthy eating habits and positive attitudes toward healthy diets, fostering lifelong healthy relationships with food.

Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programmes deepen these benefits by linking meal provision to local food systems. HGSF was pioneered and scaled by organisations like World Vision, Mary's Meals and the Partnership for Child Development (PCD) and, crucially, HGSF has been prioritised by the African Union for the past decade. HGSF fights hunger and stabilises smallholder farmer incomes, stimulates rural economies, and fosters inclusive, climate-smart agricultural practices.³

School meals contribute directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 2 (*Zero Hunger*), SDG 4 (*Quality Education*), SDG 5 (*Gender Equality*), SDG 8 (*Decent Work and Economic Growth*), and SDG 13 (*Climate Action*).

Child-Led Evidence from World Vision's 2024 Multi-Country Pilot

This multi-country pilot incorporated World Vision's social accountability approach, Citizen Voice and Action (CVA)⁴ equips communities, including children, to understand their rights, engage with local authorities, and ensure that children's voices are meaningfully included in decisions affecting basic services. This pilot gathered empirical evidence using the CVA approach across four countries: Malawi; Tanzania; the Central African Republic; and Sri Lanka.



Girls and boys across these four countries used gender-disaggregated scorecards to rate five dimensions: food availability, menu diversity, quality, frequency, and service integrity. Consistent trends emerged: insufficient portions; monotonous staples (*porridge or rice & beans*); undercooked/bland meals; single daily servings; and occasional diversion of supplies by staff. Through this, the children developed recommendations: to align quantities with daily attendance; introduce twice-daily meals plus snacks; diversify with local vegetables, fruits, fish and spices; enforce cooking standards; and institute transparent, community-led distribution oversight.

These recommendations not only validate the value of HGSF but demonstrate how embedding child voices throughout the process leads to precise, actionable improvements that boost nutrition, attendance, learning, local economies and accountability.

3. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2019. Home-Grown School Feeding Resource Framework <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/d174dc76-0624-45bd-8d92-106c14207afc>

4. World Vision. (n.d.). *Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) Booklet*

Examples from country programmes powerfully illustrate the transformative impact of school meals when they are rooted in local systems and sustainable approaches:

- **Cambodia:** Local procurement of fish and vegetables quadrupled farmer incomes and improved meal quality.⁵
- **Kenya:** Supported school meals programmes increased school enrolment by 45%, especially for after-noon classes.⁶
- **South Sudan:** In 2022, World Vision and the World Food Programme (WFP) provided daily hot meals and dry take-home rations to girls and boys in 266 schools in East Darfur, South Darfur, and South Sudan.⁷
- **Burundi:** Integrated school gardens and nutrition education diversified diets and reinforced positive behaviours at the household level.⁸

These examples underscore that when locally sourced and sustainably designed, school meals become a cornerstone of community resilience and future prosperity.

Given the extensive impacts across multiple sectors, assessing the economic efficiency of such interventions becomes essential. The following section examines the value for money that school meal programmes deliver, drawing from recent analyses of case studies by the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition's Analytics & Metrics Community of Practice.

2. Value for Money of National School Feeding Programmes

Recent analyses by the Research Consortium, entitled *Value for Money of School Feeding Programmes*, analysing national school meals programmes in Namibia, Ethiopia, Malawi and Burundi, demonstrate a high return on investment with benefits accruing to multiple sectors.

Preliminary findings: value for money of school meals programmes in selected sub-Saharan African countries.

Country	Average Benefit-cost Ratio, with respect to Education and Health & Nutrition Sectors	Social Protection Impact
Namibia ⁹	10-14 to 1	5-8% of annual food expenditures for the poorest households
Ethiopia ¹⁰	4 to 1	5% of annual food expenditures for the poorest households
Malawi ¹¹	8 to 1	5-8% of annual food expenditures for the poorest households
Burundi ¹²	6 to 1	25% of annual food expenditures for the poorest households

5. World Vision, 2024. [School Meals Overview](#)

6. World Vision, 2024. [School Meals Overview](#)

7. World Vision, 2024. [School Meals Overview](#)

8. World Vision, 2024. [School Meals Overview](#)

9. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2024. [Value for Money of School Feeding Programs in Namibia.](#)

10. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2024. [Value for Money of School Feeding Programs in Ethiopia.](#)

11. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2024. [Value for Money of School Feeding Programs in Malawi.](#)

12. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2024. [Value for Money of School Feeding Programs in Burundi.](#)

These preliminary findings highlight that while the economic impacts differ by context, school meals consistently deliver transformative benefits, in every region of every country, reinforcing their role as a strategic, high-value investment for jointly advancing education, health, economic growth and social protection.

School meals, therefore, are not only a humanitarian imperative but also a smart economic strategy.



3. The 2025 School Meals Coalition Summit: A Pivotal Opportunity

The School Meals Coalition was launched in 2021 by 41 governments who recognised the urgent need to invest in the health, wellbeing and education of their school-age children following the global education and nutrition crisis triggered by COVID-19 school closures. Now with 108 member states, six regional bodies, and over 140 partner organisations, the Coalition aims to: reach the 73 million most vulnerable children not previously covered by school meals before the COVID-19 pandemic and raise the quality of school health and nutrition programmes globally. The SMC is co-chaired by the Governments of Brazil, Finland, and France. Its Secretariat is hosted by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). The SMC is supported by four initiatives, including the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, whose mission is to provide policymakers of SMC countries with evidence-based policy insights to support the design of efficient, cost-effective, sustainable school meals programmes.

The first global Summit of the Coalition took place in Paris, France in 2023 where world leaders emphasised that school meals serve as a vital safety net, nourishing children, creating jobs, stimulating local economies and driving long-term development.

In alignment with this effort, World Vision, alongside over 100 civil society organisations, issued a Joint Call to Action¹³ urging universal, equitable, and sustainable access to school meals. The statement emphasised the role of school meals in fulfilling children's rights to food, health, and education, while empowering communities through local sourcing and multisectoral collaboration.

Looking ahead, the 2025 Global School Meals Coalition Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil represents a strategic opportunity to consolidate progress. With renewed political will and investment, school meals can be transformed from fragmented initiatives into a universal right, strengthening resilience, promoting equity, and securing better futures for all children.

13. World Vision, 2023. [Joint Civil Society Call to Action for equitable access to healthy & nutritious, sustainably sourced school meals](#)

4. Recommendations

Achieving transformational change through school meals programmes demands coordinated, multi-level actions.¹⁴

¹⁵ This involves national governments, donors and civil society organisations. The recommendations outlined below were developed to support coordinated, multi-level efforts toward transformational changes.

Governments

- Prioritise school meals in national development plans, emphasising local sourcing, gender equity and climate resilience
- Institutionalise programmes by embedding school meals into education, nutrition, agriculture and social protection strategies
- Embed local voices into national policy frameworks, ensuring school meal policies reflect the real needs and lived experiences of communities
- Upgrade infrastructure to enable the provision of planet-friendly school meals, including clean and energy efficient cookstoves, WASH facilities and storage capacity to reduce waste
- Integrate food nutrition education and build capacity among caterers who are involved in the delivery of school meals programmes and nutrition education in schools

Donors and Governments

- Align support for school meals with country-led priorities, including in fragile and conflict-affected settings
- Invest in scalable, community-driven solutions that empower local producers and strengthen delivery systems
- Commit to long-term, flexible financing that strengthens national ownership and system-wide resilience of school meal programmes, including increasing the share and sustainability of domestic budgets where appropriate

All Stakeholders

- Join the School Meals Coalition and make clear, time-bound commitments to develop and scale nationally led school meals programmes. Mobilise and amplify the voices of children, parents, farmers and educators from local communities around the world, ensuring their perspectives are reflected in the design and implementation of school meals policies and programmes.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange, sharing grassroots innovations and best practices globally.

14. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition. (n.d.). <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research/centres-projects-groups/research-consortium-for-school-health-and-nutrition#planet-friendly-school-meals>

15. Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition. (n.d.). <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4671492/>

5. Call to Action

Drawing on evidence produced by the Research Consortium and in alignment with the School Meals Coalition process, there was a collective Call to Action which was endorsed by over 100 civil society organisations and was presented at the first Global Summit 2023.

Now, we look ahead to the Second Global Summit in 2025, hosted by the Government of Brazil in Fortaleza. The focus will be on accelerating action through stronger collaboration, evidence-based policies and national implementation.

In this context, we call for:

- Governments to expand the coverage of healthy and nutritious school meals, especially for the most vulnerable children, while ensuring that school meals are equitable, planet-friendly, and efficiently administered.
- Donors and national governments to commit to multi-year, predictable funding for inclusive school meals programmes, with increased domestic budget allocation where feasible, and targeted external support for fragile contexts and countries with low income, high needs, and limited programme coverage.
- Civil society and communities to support implementation by organising inclusive community meetings and promoting grassroots initiatives that ensure local voices inform policy and decision-making.
- Governments that have not yet joined the School Meals Coalition to become members and make their commitments, prioritising school meals in national development plans and emphasising local sourcing, gender equity and climate resilience
- Together, we will turn school meals into a springboard for learning, health, local economies and climate resilience. The future of millions of children and the strength of our communities, depend on the actions we take today.



CITATIONS AND RESOURCES

- Verguet S, Limasalle P, Chakrabarti A, Husain A, Burbano C, Drake L, et al. [*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. Front Public Health. 2020;8\(December\):1–9.*](#)
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- Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition. (n.d.). <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4671492/>
- Okello, D., Fiir, B., Agaba, G., Kabahenda, M., & Gelli, A. (2024). The role of school meals in promoting health and nutrition in Uganda. *Frontiers in Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1337600>
- Schultz L, Renaud A, Bundy DAP, Barry FBM, Benveniste L, Burbano de Lara C, Lo MM, Neitzel J, O'Grady N and Drake L (2024) The SABER School Feeding policy tool: a 10-year analysis of its use by countries in developing policies for their national school meals programs. *Front. Public Health* <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1337600>