

World Vision

**ENOUGH**

**School meals  
in our words:**

**Choosing  
our future**





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## Executive summary

Across 13 countries, 1,235 children shared their experiences of school meals with child researchers. Their voices carried a clear message: **school meals matter to us**. They can mean the difference between children being hungry and being able to focus, between dropping out and staying in class, between being overlooked and being heard.

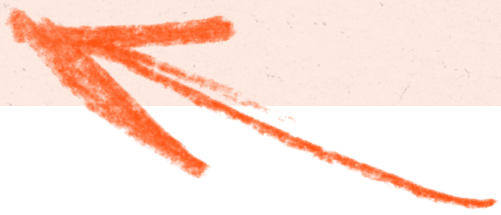
Children highlighted the strengths of school meals programmes, as well as the gaps. Many valued meals that gave them energy and supported their learning, while others pointed out where food was repetitive, too little, or prepared unhygienically. They called for bigger portions, more variety, safer kitchens, and greater opportunities to be consulted. In Lebanon, where no national school meals programme exists, children spoke of hunger, fatigue, and dropout, but also imagined a different reality: hot, healthy meals served with dignity, schools that nurture both body and mind, and a system that upholds their right to education.

What stands out is that children are not passive recipients; they are agents of change who can offer concrete solutions. They see school meals not only as food, but as a pathway to learning, health, participation, and belonging. For many, school meals are the reason they come to school and the reason they stay.

Listening to their voices is not just a matter of respect, but about making programmes work better. When children help shape school meals, these programmes can nourish them today and help secure their futures.

Our voices matter. Our school meals matter. Our future matters.

*On behalf of the 1,235 children who took part in this research*



## What if we were truly heard?

*By Giselle, child researcher and delegate, 15 years old, Brazil*

The research outlined in this report was done by children and young people, like myself, to show that our school years really shape our futures. When governments care about children and young people, **it gives us hope and strength to keep fighting for a future that's more beautiful than today.**

Over 1,000 children from 13 countries came together to share experiences that might seem simple, maybe even ordinary, but really matter to us. Through this research, we wanted to speak on behalf of our peers and show why school meals matter. These meals are not just about children having enough food, but also because nutritious, high quality, hygienically prepared food can have a dramatic impact on our learning.

When school meals are nutritious, students develop healthier eating habits, and we feel that our voices and well-being matter. When meals fall short, it's not just hunger that appears, inequality becomes more visible.

Although some countries, like my own, Brazil, have succeeded in reducing hunger, we still have much to fight for. Ensuring all children have equal access to quality school meals is more than a policy, it is an act of respect and a commitment to our futures.

Our research shows that children don't only want to point out problems. **We want to be part of the solution.** We want to work alongside adults, share our ideas, and transform school meals into an everyday right that strengthens our bodies and our confidence.

That's why, for me, being part of this struggle, which is so big, and yet so personal for every student, is an honour. Speaking up about this cause also means calling on others to take action. Every stage of life shapes what comes next.

So, for us, school meals mean much more than just a plate of food served at lunchtime. Instead, the meals provide dignity, safety and hope for the future.

Remember, we want to be heard, we want to be cared for, and we want to be treated with respect as citizens of today, not just in the future.

**Our voices matter. Our school meals matter. Our future matters.**





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## Introduction

School meals are one of the few things that unite millions of children worldwide from all kinds of backgrounds. For some, school meals are an important supplement, for others, they are the only proper meal of the day. But school meals are never just about food — they are a vital lifeline, giving children the chance to learn, to stay healthy, to feel safe, and to have hope for the future.

Today, hundreds of millions of children around the world receive school meals. But numbers don't tell the whole story. To really understand why school meals matter, **we need to listen to children themselves.**

This child-led research study captures children's real experiences of school meals and shows why listening to them is vital for building stronger school meals programmes. These meals are for children, yet their opinions are rarely sought when programmes are designed. Adults decide what, when, and where children eat, without asking them if the meals are enough, tasty, nutritious, or even enjoyable.

This report brings together the experiences of children from 13 countries: Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Guatemala, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malawi, Peru, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In each country, children carried out their own research on school meals, designing the questions, speaking to their peers, collecting data, and reflecting on their findings.

The purpose of this report is simple: **to bring children's voices together and to ensure they are heard in places that matter.** It is not only a record of what children said, but also a tool to influence change. By sharing children's views, the report aims to strengthen global advocacy, including at the 2025 Global School Meals Summit in Brazil, so that children's perspectives shape future commitments. The report also provides governments, schools, and local partners with insights that can improve access, quality, safety, and the sustainability of school meals programmes.

This research study is part of World Vision's ENOUGH campaign, which calls for an end to child hunger and malnutrition worldwide. The campaign highlights how practical, proven solutions can transform children's daily lives and can help build a future where every child has enough nourishing food to thrive.



## Why child-led research?

This report is not written about children, **it is written with them and by them**. The research study was led by child researchers aged 12 to 17 who consulted other children from as young as age three and was supported by World Vision staff and volunteers. The child researchers designed their own questions, conducted the interviews, facilitated discussions, analysed their data, and reflected on the results. Their leadership gives the research study its true value as the findings reflect children's realities, not adult assumptions.

Child-led research really matters because:



**Children represent a large part of society:** in many of the countries included in this study, nearly half of the population is under 18. Their perspectives are not only relevant, but essential for shaping programmes that affect whole societies.



**Children are among the most vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition:** empty stomachs make it harder to learn, to grow well, and to stay healthy. These effects can last a lifetime, showing why children's views on school meals are so important.

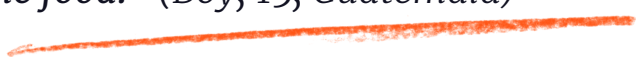


**Children are often left out:** they are frequently excluded from the decisions that shape their lives. National and international forums often discuss children, yet children are rarely invited to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.



**Children bring authentic insights:** their perspectives reveal what truly works, what does not, and what needs to change - insights that adults may overlook. Their feedback leads to more responsive, culturally appropriate, and effective interventions that better meet children's needs.

*“It is important that they listen to us, because we are the ones who eat the food.” (Boy, 15, Guatemala)*



**Children are agents of change:** they do not only highlight problems, but propose practical solutions, influence peers and adults, and mobilise communities. Their recommendations are grounded in their lived experiences, making them realistic and impactful.

Child-led research is more than a methodology — **it is about sharing power with children**. By recognising them as rights-holders and experts on their own lives, child-led research makes participation meaningful and generates evidence that reflects children's daily realities.

For World Vision, child-led research strengthens advocacy by providing first-hand evidence that helps inform national and global processes. By putting children's perspectives at the centre, this research study shows that stronger school meals programmes and efforts to end child hunger and malnutrition must be built *with children*, not just for *them*.



## What children said about school meals

Across all 13 countries, children expressed both appreciation and frustration with school meals. Taken together, their voices share a complex picture, full of appreciation, but also challenges that need to be heard:



**Satisfaction:** 59% of children rated their meals positively (Good or Very Good), while 38% rated them negatively (Fair or Bad). This shows that while many children value school meals, others are disappointed, usually due to overly small portions, repetitive menus, or poor quality food.



**Participation:** Many children said they are rarely asked what they think about school meals, and when they share their opinions, adults do not listen. Still, about 7 in 10 said they want to be included in decisions about school meals.

These findings set the scene for the stories that follow. They show that school meals matter to children's health, learning, and dignity, and children want to help shape how programmes work.



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## Children's satisfaction with school meals

Child researchers started with a simple question: Do you like the meals served at school? For many children, the answer was yes. They described feeling happy when meals were served and glad to have food they could rely on every day.

*“I feel happy when I eat at school, because I don’t have to feel hungry.” (Girl, 12, Cambodia)*

These words reflect the relief that many children expressed, knowing at least one meal each day was guaranteed. This sense of security made school not only a place of learning but also a place of care and nourishment. Children in Indonesia described similar sentiments, expressing appreciation for the Free Nutritious Meals programme which they felt provided healthy and varied food, showing how careful design and diverse menus can make meals more enjoyable. In Zambia, almost every child reported enjoying their school meals, with 99% saying they were good or very good. **For many, the food was not only tasty, but a source of pride for the children.**



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*“When we eat at school, we have the strength to continue with our lessons.” (Boy, 13, Malawi)*



However, not every child was satisfied with their school meals. Some said the meals were too repetitive, too plain, or simply not to their liking. A group of Brazilian students captured a recurrent view that the food was often “just okay” — something to “get through” rather than enjoy. Other children described a choice between taste and hunger.



*“Sometimes the food is good, but sometimes it’s not tasty. I eat it because I am hungry.” (Girl, 14, Dominican Republic)*

This girl’s words highlight that eating school meals is not always about enjoyment, but about filling an empty stomach. In Sri Lanka, younger children who received school meals said **this was the most important food of their day**. Older students not benefitting from the programme spoke about how much it would help if they were also included.

Satisfaction with portion size was another issue discussed in many countries. For some children, the food tasted fine but there simply wasn’t enough of it.



*“The meals are not enough for us. We want bigger portions.” (Boy, 15, Zimbabwe)*

For children who depend heavily on school meals, leaving lunch still hungry prevented them from fully benefitting from their school meals programme. **Hunger did not just leave them uncomfortable, it made learning harder.**

These accounts show that satisfaction cannot be taken for granted. For some children, school meals bring comfort, energy, and a reason to stay in school. For others, limited variety or small portions reduce their impact. What the children’s research clearly showed is that every child has an opinion on the food they eat and they are ready to share it.





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## Learning, energy, attendance, and health

Across all 13 countries, children repeatedly said that school meals helped them to focus and stay in class. Hunger makes concentration difficult, but with food in their stomachs, many described having enough energy to learn.

*“When we eat in school, we do not feel sleepy in class.”  
(Girl, 13, Ghana)*

This reflects what many children know from experience: **hunger makes learning harder**, while a daily school meal can make a big difference. It not only fills an empty stomach but also supports learning and development. In Indonesia, students highlighted that school meals give children the much-needed energy to concentrate through long lessons, while Zambian students emphasised that **school meals improve academic performance by reducing children's hunger**, allowing them to concentrate better and to achieve higher marks.

In several countries, children linked school meals directly to their ability to remain in their classes. Having something to eat in the middle of the day gave them energy to keep learning and reduced the need to leave school early in search of food. In Rwanda, children noted that before school meals were provided, some students would leave school to look for food or skip classes altogether. However, **now children stay in school**.

*“Because of the meals, we stay at school the whole day.”  
(Boy, 15, Rwanda)*

In Lebanon, where school meals are limited to a few public schools which depend on donor funding, **children stressed that a daily school meal could transform their education.** Many children said they arrive at school without breakfast, struggle to focus, and sometimes drop out to work just to eat.



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*“We spend like 8 hours at school. Imagine 8 hours going by hungry? This is not okay, right? It should be part of the school’s responsibility. Just tell me whose responsibility is it?” (Girl, 15, Lebanon)*

They also explained that without school meals, lunchtimes often made them feel excluded as students frequently depend on unhealthy, over-priced kiosk snacks or go hungry altogether. Some explained that this difference led to bullying.

*“Kids who have something to eat usually bully the ones who don’t.” (Boy, 14, Lebanon)*

At the same time, other children expressed concerns that when meals were not available, attendance dropped quickly. For instance, in Zimbabwe, students said missed or reduced meals caused some classmates to stop coming to school. This highlights how important school meals are, not just for individual learning, but also for keeping whole groups of children engaged in education.

For many children, **school meals are not only about nutrition but about education itself.** They are the reason children come to school, and the reason they stay.



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## Clean plates, safe spaces

In every country where the research took place, children emphasised that school meals are not only about taste and quantity but also about safety. They want to trust that what they eat is clean and will not make them sick.

In Malawi, younger children and their caregivers appreciated that school cooking areas were safe and hygienic, reassuring them that the meals supported rather than risked their health. Similarly, in Cambodia, children said they trusted the meals because the kitchens were clean and the food was well-prepared.

*“Our kitchen is clean, so the food is good and safe.” (Girl, Cambodia)*

But in many countries, **children spoke about poor conditions in kitchens and dining spaces.**

In Rwanda and Zimbabwe, for instance, students described food sometimes being prepared or served in unclean environments. Similarly, in Peru, a boy said that children occasionally became ill after eating food that was not stored properly.



*“Sometimes the food is not well kept, and it makes us sick.” (Boy, Peru)*



Children also cared about where and how they ate. In some schools a lack of proper dining spaces or sufficient utensils or hygiene provisions made mealtimes less comfortable and less dignified. Where schools provided safe, organised eating areas, children felt more respected and valued.

*“The meals are good, but sometimes there are no plates or soap to wash our hands.” (Student, Zambia)*

Lebanese children, the majority of whom do not receive school meals, imagined what dignified provision could look like: a clean kitchen, hot Lebanese dishes like lentils, stew with rice, and soup, and a bright dining hall where everyone can eat without. This vision demonstrates that even in contexts without school meals, **children hold clear expectations for safety, hygiene, and dignity.** Taken together, these reflections show that safety and cleanliness are not minor details. For children, they are at the heart of what makes a school meal acceptable. When hygiene is taken seriously, children feel safe and respected.

## Children's voices at the table

One of the strongest messages from the research was that children want to be heard. Across most countries, many children said they were hardly ever asked for their opinions about the school meals they eat every day. Decisions about menus, preparation, and quality were usually made by adults without asking for students' input.

In Guatemala, children overwhelmingly said that their feedback was not sought, even though they were the ones eating the food. In Ghana, children observed that while teachers and parents sometimes discussed school meals, their own voices were excluded.

*“It is important that they listen to us, because we are the ones who eat the food.” (Boy, 15, Guatemala)*



In Malawi, caregivers of children aged 3 to 5 also said that families should be consulted and work with schools to improve school meals.

In Rwanda, however, many children said they were regularly asked about school meals. This made them feel respected and gave them the confidence to share their views with teachers, parents, and school principals. For them, **being listened to is an important part of feeling recognised, included, and valued**. In other countries, some children reported being invited to share their ideas, but these were exceptions. In Cambodia, for instance, a few students said teachers occasionally asked them if the food was good or filling, though this did not always lead to changes.

What came through clearly is that children went beyond simply describing problems and instead wanted to talk about solutions. Many had practical ideas, from introducing greater variety in the meals, to improving cleanliness in kitchens, to involving students in serving and monitoring standards. They wanted to be active participants, not passive recipients.

In Lebanon, children went even further, drafting an open letter to the Ministers of Education and Higher Education, Public Health, and Social Affairs. Their requests were concrete: meals for all students, nutritious menus with fruits and nuts, culturally appropriate dishes, student involvement in menu planning, and affordable kiosks where meals cannot be free. This advocacy shows that **children not only want to be heard but are ready to engage policymakers directly**.

Children recognised that being listened to made them feel valued. When their opinions were ignored, some felt their wellbeing was not taken seriously. In contrast, when adults did ask, they felt respected and more motivated in school.

The research project was a powerful example of what meaningful participation can look like. By designing questions, interviewing peers, and analysing results, the child researchers showed how **children can take the lead when given the opportunity to do so**. Their work demonstrates that participation is not only possible but essential for ensuring school meals programmes respond to children's actual needs.



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## If we could change the meals...

When asked what they would change about school meals, children had a lot of ideas about where programmes are falling short and how they can be improved. The most common request was for bigger portions. In Zimbabwe, many said the food ran out too quickly, leaving them hungry.

*“The meals are not enough for us. We want bigger portions.”  
(Boy, 15, Zimbabwe)*



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The second most common request was for more variety. Children in Brazil and Cambodia said the food was often repetitive, making meals something to endure rather than enjoy. They asked for more diverse menus, with fruit, vegetables, and different recipes to break the monotony. In Zambia, children wanted greater variety and better quality.

Cleanliness and safety were another strong theme. Students suggested better storage, cleaner kitchens, and safer preparation areas. In several countries, children wanted to be involved in monitoring hygiene so they could trust the food was safe. In Zambia, children also called for simple but important improvements, such as having soap and plates available and designated eating areas.

*“We are happy with the food, but we need a proper place to sit and eat.” (Student, Zambia)*



Children also wanted greater involvement of families and communities. In Malawi, caregivers said they should work more closely with schools, both to prepare food and to ensure younger children are well cared for at mealtimes. In Zimbabwe and Ghana, children suggested that parents or community members could help with cooking or supporting the school meals programme.

In Lebanon, children are calling for a decades-old system to change so that their right to food becomes part of their right to education. Without a school meals programme, they said hunger undermines their health, learning, and dignity, while **a simple meal could transform not only classrooms but entire communities**. As one child researcher explained:

*“Do you know that a school is like a mini version of a community? From students to their parents, teachers, and the whole admin. Imagine if a school starts making a difference in a child’s life, in nutrition, education, and skills. That change spreads to families. And if other schools do the same, aren’t we transforming whole communities?”* (Girl, 15, Lebanon)



Children in Lebanon and Sri Lanka highlighted the need for greater inclusion in school meals. The contrast was particularly clear in Sri Lanka: **primary students who received meals spoke about how essential they were, while secondary students who miss out want to be included.**

*“We only get meals until primary school, but older children also come to school hungry.”* (Secondary school student, Sri Lanka)



Children in Lebanon also expressed frustration at the absence of accountability:

*“Parents say they’re not capable. The administration says they’re not capable. The government says it’s not capable. Then who is? Do we just lose our education, our health, and our future?”* (Girl, 14, Lebanon)





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For Lebanon’s children, the message is clear. School meals are about more than just food — they are about fairness, dignity, and hope. Their voices challenge leaders to begin a programme that can feed learning and fuel change across the nation.

Finally, many children across the 13 countries stressed the need for their own voices to be heard. Beyond one-off external opportunities, like this research project, **they wanted ongoing ways to share opinions and shape their school meals programmes.** In Cambodia, for instance, one girl described children’s frustration at being asked for feedback, only for their suggestions to be ignored.

*“Sometimes teachers ask us if the food is good, but nothing changes after that.” (Girl, 13, Cambodia)*

These recommendations show that children can not only identify problems but are also eager to be part of the solutions. **Their ideas are practical, realistic, and grounded in their daily experiences.** If adults take children seriously, school meals can become more than just a service delivered to children, but a partnership built with them.



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**Our voices matter.**

**Our school meals matter.**

**Our future matters.**

This report exists thanks to the 1,235 children who chose to lead, to ask questions, and to share their truths. We are deeply grateful for their courage, creativity and vision. Their voices call on us ensures that children's perspectives are present and powerful in shaping school meals that reflect dignity, health and hope.



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## Methodology

Child researchers were trained and supported to carry out research on school meals in 13 countries. They **adapted the research questions** to their own contexts, ensuring they were child-friendly and relevant for their peers. Using surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews, they explored children's views on school meals. In most countries, the focus was on school-aged children, aged 8 to 18 years.

The study engaged **1,235 children (61% boys, 37% girls) and 111 caregivers** across the 13 countries. Participants came from rural and urban settings and included children with disabilities, ensuring representation of a wide range of perspectives.

In **Malawi**, younger children aged **3–5 years** were consulted in a child-friendly manner at Early Childhood Development centres, with their parents and caregivers engaged in parallel.

In **Sri Lanka**, child researchers consulted younger students who receive school meals and older students who do not to offer a dual perspective.

In **Zambia**, a sample of 128 children from 10 districts provided a broader, nationwide view.

In **Lebanon** — the only country in this study without a national school meals programme — child researchers documented what schooling feels like without meals: hunger, fatigue, bullying, and dropout. This provides a powerful baseline for understanding why school meals matter worldwide.

All activities followed World Vision's child safeguarding standards and ethical principles. Children gave informed consent, participation was voluntary, and sessions were conducted in supportive and safe environments.

Because the studies were designed and led by children and combined both qualitative and quantitative data, it was not always possible to aggregate the findings uniformly across all countries. The report used thematic analysis to identify key themes across the 13 countries, with particular attention paid to emphasising children's priorities and narratives and respecting the unique voices and contexts of each country. This approach not only generated valuable data but also gave children the opportunity to act as researchers, shaping the process and leading the analysis.

# Acknowledgements

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## CHILD AND ADULT SAFEGUARDING

World Vision ensured the safe and ethical participation of girls, boys adhering to World Vision’s Safeguarding policy and protocols on data collection and World Vision’s Code of Conduct.

Data collectors were trained on how to conduct interviews in an ethical and safe manner. Children were oriented on the possibility of withdrawing from the interview process at any moment. Informed consent was obtained for all photographs included in this report.

