



African Union Biennial Report on School Meals Programme (2023-2024)

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ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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FOREWORD

This report is part of the implementation of the African Union Heads of State and Government decision Assembly/AU/Dec.589 (XXVI) article 17, which recommended that the African Union Commission report regularly on implementation of the decision to the Assembly through the Executive Council.

I am grateful to the Home-Grown School Feeding Cluster Members and key actors, such as WFP- African Union Global Office, Food and Agricultural Organisation, Africa Early Childhood Network, Forum for African Women Educationalists, World Vision International, the Data Monitoring Initiative, Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition and Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Secretariat for their collaboration and technical support for the successful completion of this biennial report. We extend our sincere gratitude to all Member States for their collaboration and support in the drafting of this third iteration of the report, following the African Union Assembly's decision 589 XXVI on home-grown school feeding in Africa in 2016.

It is important to note that School Meals programs contributes to multisectoral outcomes in education, nutrition, agriculture, local development and gender equality; the programs also contributes to the achievement of SDG 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education),

5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 17 (Partnerships). At the continental level School meals also contribute to the accomplishment of Agenda 2063 aspirations 1, 3 and 7.

The findings presented in this report underscore the importance of innovative financing approaches, strengthening infrastructure and logistics, empowering smallholder farmers, and fostering robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Furthermore, the integration of school meals with health interventions, data-driven decision-making, and enhancing community engagement are crucial for the success of these programs.

As we move forward, it is essential to continue promoting holistic interventions that address multiple barriers to ensure that every child benefits from education and improved nutrition. The collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders and partners are key to advancing these initiatives and realizing the vision of a nourished and educated Africa.

We hope this report serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders committed to enhancing the well-being and prospects of Africa children. Let us continue to work together with dedication and resolve to build a brighter and healthier future for all.

In my capacity as the Director for Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, I am pleased to present the 2023–2024 biennial report on the operationalization of home-grown school feeding in Member States.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, African Union leaders recognized the importance of school feeding programs for developing human capital on the continent, in accordance with the goals of Agenda 2063 and CESA 16-25. This commitment was formalized with the adoption of the HGSF decision (Assembly/AU/Dec.589 (XXVI) by the 26th Assembly. To further this agenda, the African Union Executive Council approved the Sustainable School Food and Nutrition Initiative (EX.CL/1025(XXXI) in July 2017 during its 31st Ordinary Session. This initiative provides a strategic roadmap for implementing the Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy (2015-2025) and achieving the targets set out in the 2014 Malabo Declaration (Assembly/AU/Dec.490-516 (XXII).

Following the 2016 AU Assembly endorsement of school feeding as a crucial component of human capital development, the HGSF Cluster within the African Union Commission was tasked with providing regular updates on its implementation progress to the Assembly via the Executive Council. To inform these continental strategies, the AU Commission undertakes a study on the significance and effects of school feeding programs across the continent.

This culminated in the 2018 publication and launch of Sustainable School Feeding across the African Union, a foundational study that has since served as a benchmark for subsequent reporting. The inaugural HGSF Biennial Report (African Union, 2018b) was a starting point. Data gathered from Member States on key variables and exploring the broader benefits of HGSF initiatives was used in the study.

The last edition of the biennial report, published in 2022, focused on the period from 2021 to 2022. This current report continues that series, addressing issues related to the school meals program for the 2023-2024 period. It includes a comparison of the achievements and challenges identified in the previous report. The methodology for this biennial report was established in collaboration with the African Union Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation department and its partners. This report offers a comprehensive overview of the current state of the school meals program across the continent, detailing achievements, challenges, and the program impact through the examination of successful case studies and documented data.

The 2023-2024 Biennial Report is organized in four chapters and offers a comprehensive overview of the school meals program in Africa. The first chapter presents an overview of the programs, detailing their modalities and targeting approaches, while highlighting trends and the current status of the initiative. In the second chapter, the report delves into achievements and challenges related to school meals programs across the continent, also exploring the role of innovations in enhancing these initiatives. The third chapter analyzes the programs impact on various socio-economic domains, such as education, health, nutrition, and the local economy. Finally, the fourth chapter focuses on partnerships and collaborations, emphasizing the essential contributions of diverse stakeholders and partners in advancing.

Main Findings

In-school meals are the predominant modality for food provision in Africa, with 94% of programs offering meals on school premises. Take-home rations (THR) are typically provided alongside in-school meals, serving as a complementary measure to enhance school enrollment and retention, particularly for vulnerable students, such as girls.

Targeting is a critical design element of school meal programs, profoundly influencing their effectiveness and efficiency. Four primary targeting models exist: universal, geographic,

quasi-universal with individual targeting, and quasi-universal with school targeting. Each approach has its own advantages and disadvantages, and their implementation often depends on resource availability. For countries facing resource constraints, particularly in Africa, geographic targeting is recommended as it ensures that all children within identified regions and districts receive meals, thereby maximizing the programs impact within the limits of available resources.

There is a strong commitment to school meal programs across Africa, with 91% of African countries having established school meal policies by 2024 at least implementing complementary programs such as nutrition, health, or agricultural policies. This cross-sector collaboration strengthens program effectiveness. HGSF programs further boost local economies by sourcing food from smallholder farmers, building capacity through school-farmer

connections, and improving meal quality and nutrition. This commitment is further evidenced by the implementation of Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programs in over 40 African Union Member States. Additionally, majority of funding for these programs, 83% comes from domestic sources and 35 countries have a dedicated budget line for school meal programs in 2024. The number of children reached by school meal programs in Africa has also increased from 38.4 million in 2013 to 86.86 million in 2024, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of these programs for children's education and well-being.

School meals programs enhance educational outcomes by improving enrollment and reducing dropout rates through better nutrition. These initiatives support broader health and social protection efforts, creating vital connections between education, nutrition, and local agriculture.

School meal programs play a crucial role in addressing childhood malnutrition across Africa. By providing nutritious meals and promoting dietary diversity, they help mitigate health risks and enhance

cognitive development. Implementing nutrition-sensitive school feeding programs can significantly lower the economic costs associated with undernutrition, leading to improved health and educational outcomes.

However, there are still challenges related to limited funding, inadequate infrastructure and facilities, and lack of multi-sectoral coordination in planning and implementation. For instance, despite the continuous increase in total funding for school meal programs in Africa—from \$1.32 billion USD in 2020 to \$1.48 billion USD in 2022, and further to \$1.96 billion USD in 2024—this amount still represents only 3% of the global school meals budget for 2024.

Furthermore, inconsistent agricultural support and the need for a cohesive food systems strategy remain challenges. While many countries are improving data management, transitioning from paper-based systems to digital platforms, the need for sustainable energy sources in school kitchens is also critical.

Despite this progress, challenges like inconsistent access to nutritious food, funding limitations, infrastructure gaps, and weak community engagement still hinder the full potential of these programs. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring the long-term success and impact of school meal initiatives across Africa.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The successful implementation of school meal programs in Africa is crucial for addressing child nutrition, enhancing educational access, and stimulating local economies. While significant progress has been made, there are still considerable challenges that require targeted action. To ensure that these programs effectively meet their goals and reach every child in need, a comprehensive set of recommendations is necessary. The following key recommendations are derived from the analysis and findings of this study.

- **Exploring innovative financing approaches:** Exploring diverse funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and community-based fundraising, to enhance financial sustainability. It is important to advocate for increased domestic resource allocation with dedicated budget lines for school meals.
- **Strengthening infrastructure and logistics:** Investing in essential infrastructure, including kitchen facilities and adequate storage for food, is crucial in enhancing the quality of the school meals program. Ensuring access to clean water for food preparation and hygiene is very critical in enhancing the quality of the school meals. It is also important to develop efficient procurement and distribution systems to minimize waste and ensure programming reach.
- **Empowering smallholder farmers:** Prioritizing HGSF programs by providing training and technical assistance to smallholder farmers. In this regard, facilitating direct connections between schools and local cooperatives is important to create stable markets and establish transparent procurement processes for fair pricing.
- **Putting in place robust monitoring and evaluation:** It is important to develop standardized indicators to track program effectiveness and nutritional outcomes. Implementing regular monitoring and interactive dashboards that help to identify areas for improvement and ensure accountability is important. The Global School Meals Coalition can provide technical assistance in this regard.
- **Promoting program integration:** Scaling up the integration of school meals with health interventions, such as deworming and micronutrient supplementation. Countries are encouraged to design their school meals program in a comprehensive way that address children's nutritional, health, and educational needs to maximize program benefits.

- **Establishing a plan for emergency situations:** It is essential for countries to develop contingency plans that ensure the continuity of school meal programs during conflicts and natural disasters, thereby safeguarding children's well-being. In this context, countries can draw on the expertise of partners such as the WFP, which have demonstrated effective strategies for providing school meals in conflict-affected and fragile settings. Leveraging these partnerships can enhance resilience and ensure that vulnerable children continue to receive the nutrition they need in challenging circumstances.
- **Data-driven decision-making:** Countries should establish robust data collection systems for school meal programs, gathering information on beneficiaries and resource requirements. This data will guide resource allocation and policy adjustments, drawing insights from successful models like Ghana's School Feeding Program (GSFP) and Namibia's School Meals Information Management System (NaSIS). By implementing such systems, countries can enhance program effectiveness and ensure that resources are utilized efficiently to meet the needs of vulnerable children.
- **Enhancing community engagement:** It is important to foster active community involvement in decision-making processes, ensuring accountability and ownership of school meal programs while encouraging local participation in logistics and meal preparation.
- **Adopting holistic interventions:** To address multiple barriers, countries should design and implement comprehensive strategies that integrate school meals with health training and income-generating activities, especially for marginalized groups. This holistic approach will enhance enrollment and attendance, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to benefit from education and improved nutrition



1. OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM IN AFRICA

1.1. INTRODUCTION

School Meal Programs (SMPs) are interventions that provide students with meals, snacks, or take-home rations (in kind and vouchers) and are intended to address multiple cross-sectoral objectives. They often aim to enhance access to education by reducing barriers to school enrolment, raising attendance and retention, increasing students' ability to concentrate during the school day, and improving learning outcomes (African Union, 2018). They also aim to reduce the gender gap in education by addressing barriers to schooling that are particularly salient for girls (Gelli, 2007; Bundy et al., 2017).

SMPs are not only useful in encouraging children to enroll and stay in school but also for enhancing their learning. Hungry and malnourished children lack the capacity for learning possessed compared to their well-nourished peers. Overall, malnutrition undermines cognitive development, resulting in irreversible losses for learning opportunities for the future (WFP, 2007). The lowering of human acumen due to avoidable factors is a travesty, even illegal and wasteful. Well-designed school food programs that include micronutrient fortification can provide vast nutritional benefits, thus mitigating the undermining effect that malnutrition has on children's education (UNICEF, 2007).

SMPs can vary in the modality through which food is provided, the contents of the menu, the way children are targeted at receiving food, the embedding of conditions into the criteria for participation, and the pairing of school meals with other

health and nutrition programs, among many other factors. There two main broad modalities through which food is provided to school children: in-school meals that also includes in-school snacks (such as fortified biscuits, fruits, or milk) and take-home rations given to the students' families, often conditional upon their children maintaining a certain rate of school attendance (African Union, 2018).

1.2. School Meals Program in Africa: Definition and Models

School Meal Programs are initiatives that provide nutritious food to children during the school day, offering options for breakfast, lunch, or both. These programs may include complete meals or healthy snacks and fortified foods, such as high-energy biscuits. While they primarily refer to meals served on school premises, complementary methods like take-home rations also exist, where food is given to families, typically contingent upon their children's school attendance (Africa Union, 2018).

Broadly speaking, there are two main modalities of the school meals program: in-school meals, where food is consumed in school premises, and take-home rations (THR), which supply families with food to prepare at home (World Bank, 2020). The latter serves as an incentive for families to send their children to school. Both modalities are available in various formats. In-school meals may include, among other options, hot cooked dishes, dry meals, or fortified snacks like biscuits. In many countries, in-school meals are paired with THR to support particularly vulnerable students, especially girls, aiming to enhance school enrolment and retention rates while addressing gender and social disparities. Since THR are typically not

implemented as standalone initiatives but rather alongside in-school feeding programs, policymakers should consider integrating THR as a complementary measure within existing school feeding frameworks instead of treating them as an alternative (Africa Union, 2018). For example, the 2019 GCNF survey showed that in-school meals were the predominant modality for food provision in Africa, with 94% of programs offering meals on school premises. Additionally, 12% of programs provided snacks, while 26% included take-home rations. While take-home rations are offered as a complement to meals or snacks, no program has exclusively provided take-home rations (Wineman, 2022).

Beyond program modality, targeting is a crucial design element for SMPs, significantly impacting their effectiveness and efficiency. Four primary target models exist (Bundy et al, 2024):

- **Universal:** This approach provides free meals to all students at a specific school level, without any pre-defined restrictions. Universal targeting is primarily employed in high-income countries.
- **Geographic:** Food is provided to all students within a designated region, typically selected based on vulnerability criteria, low educational attainment, or poor nutritional indicators or areas highly susceptible to issues of food insecurity. Geographic targeting is the most common approach in low-income countries, while no high-income country utilizes it.
- **Quasi-universal with individual targeting:** This is a nationwide approach that refines targeting beyond geographic criteria, focusing on individual student characteristics. Meals are provided to students who meet specific thresholds, such as those from low family income.

- **Quasi-universal with school targeting:** Like the quasi-universal with individual targeting, quasi-universal with school targeting is a nationwide model and it uses refined targeting criteria. However, it focuses on school level criteria such as schools with a high proportion of students from low-income families. Both quasi-universal approaches are more prevalent in upper-middle and high-income countries.

While universal school meal provision is the ideal scenario, resource limitations often necessitate a more targeted approach. Recognizing this, the AUDA-NEPAD guidelines for the HGSP Programme recommend geographic targeting for African countries facing such constraints. This strategy ensures that all children within schools located in specifically identified regions and districts receive meals through the program, maximizing impact within available resources (AUDA-NEPAD, 2022).

1.1.1. Home Grown School Meals programs

Home Grown School Meals (HGSM) programs procure locally grown food with the intent to promote local economic development and agricultural transformation. By meeting the schools' demand for food with that supplied by smallholder farmers, these programs may be able to foster a new market, with predictable and structured demand for farm output and create jobs along the entire food value chain (African Union 2021; Bundy et al. 2013; FAO and WFP 2018; Nehring et al. 2017). Examples across the continent on how HGSM programs create jobs are documented in section 3.2. Local procurement may also address health and nutrition objectives by ensuring that school menus contain a variety of nutritious foods (Aliyar et al. 2015; Drake et al. 2020; Fernandes et al. 2016; Singh 2021;

Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler 2011). Thus, while HGSM programs serve as catalyst for local economic development and agricultural transformation, it helps to broaden the food basket and ensures dietary diversity.

1.1.2. Emergency School meals

SMPs in emergency settings complement and augment general food assistance interventions by filling the nutritional gap, providing dietary diversity, and ensuring access to critical nutrients and vitamins such as iron, vitamin C, and vitamin B. Schools are also a platform for promoting health and nutrition education, and a means of surveying and monitoring the nutrition situation of school children and ensuring that they are provided with a wider variety of nutritious foods (Hatløy and Sommerfelt 2017).

In 2023, the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes (EHAGL) region recorded 2.3 million refugees of school-going age (4-18 years), over half (51%) of whom were out of school. The year 2024 marked a record high number of children affected by school closures due to insecurity, with 2.8 million children deprived of their right to education in a region of West and Central Africa. Forced displacement also reached unprecedented levels, with over 8.2 million internally displaced people and close to 2.7 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024).

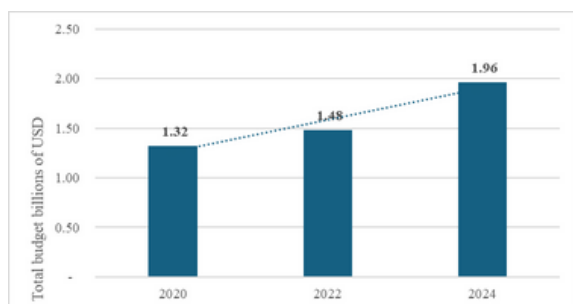
1.3. School Meals Program in Africa: Trends and the Current State

A strong commitment to SMPs is evident across Africa. According to a 2022 AU report, 89% of African countries have established national school meal policies and this rate has further increased to 91% in 2024 (GCNF, 2024).

This demonstrates a widespread recognition of the importance of SMPs. This commitment is further reflected in the growing adoption of HGSM programs. The 2022 AUDA-NEPAD report highlights this trend, noting that over 40 African Union (AU) Member States are implementing HGSM initiatives. While these programs share the common goal of providing nutritious meals to students, their specific designs and implementation strategies are tailored to the unique contexts of each country.

Funding for school meal programs in Africa has seen substantial growth, reflecting the increasing prioritization of these initiatives. Total budgets have risen from \$1.32 billion in 2020 to \$1.96 billion in 2024 school year (GCNF, 2024), demonstrating a significant investment in children's nutrition and education. However, this represents only approximately 3% of the global school meal program budget of \$67.2 billion during that year. In 2024, the vast majority of this funding, 83%, comes from domestic sources, underscoring the commitment of African governments to these programs. International contributions account for the remaining 17%. Within domestic funding, a growing portion, around 10% in 2024, is attributed to the domestic private sector, domestic NGOs, and other similar sources, indicating a broadening base of support. Furthermore, a dedicated budget line item for school meal programs is becoming increasingly common, with 35 African countries reporting this practice in 2024 (GCNF, 2024). This dedicated funding mechanism provides greater transparency and ensures more predictable resource allocation for these vital programs.

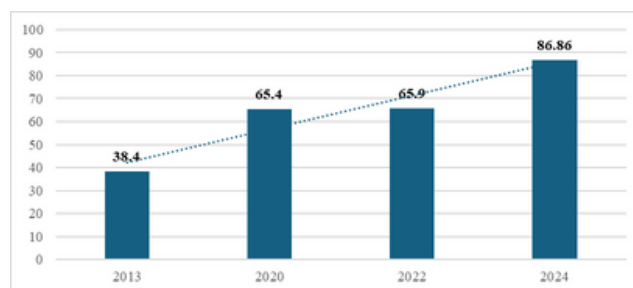
Figure 1: Sources of school meals program



Source: AU (2021, 2022) and GCNF (2024)

The number of children reached by SMPs in Africa has demonstrated remarkable growth over the years. In 2013, the program provided meals to 38.4 million students. However, by 2020, this number had impressively surged to 65.4 million, marking a significant 71% increase. This expansion trend continued, with the program reaching 65.9 million students in 2022. It is important to note that the estimates for 2020 were based on surveys conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. In that year, nearly all schools across the continent were closed to help reduce virus transmission. Therefore, the results for 2022, which reflect data collected after the pandemic and during the reopening of schools, represent a significant achievement. The latest estimates from the 2024 survey reveal that 86.86 million children across African countries are benefiting from school meal programs, representing a 32% increase from the 2022 figure. This consistent growth underscores the growing recognition of the critical role school meals play in supporting children's education and well-being throughout the continent.

Figure 2: Number of children reached



Source: AU (2021, 22) and GCNF (2024)

While the primary focus of school meal programs in Africa has traditionally been educational intervention, there's a growing trend towards integrating complementary school-based programs, particularly in health and nutrition. This reflects a more holistic approach to child development, recognizing that learning outcomes are deeply intertwined with well-being. For example, in 2022, a striking 95% of African countries delivering school meals also implemented at least one additional health or nutrition intervention. This reached 100% in 2024 with all countries implementing at least one complementary activity. However, fully integrated packages, encompassing a comprehensive range of 7 to 10 complementary interventions alongside school meals, are less common in 2022, with only 10% of countries achieving this level of integration. A slightly larger proportion (19%) offers a more moderate integration, combining school meals with four or more complementary interventions. This suggests that while the value of integrated programs is recognized, logistical and resource constraints may hinder broader implementation of fully comprehensive packages.

1.4. School Meals Programs Impact and Benefits

The impact of school feeding programs in Africa can be categorized across five key areas: education, health and nutrition, human capital development, economic growth, and social protection.

- **Enhance health and nutrition:** School meals provide a crucial safety net, ensuring children's access to education, health, and nutrition. By addressing micronutrient deficiencies and providing nutritious meals, these programs contribute to children's healthy development and pave the way for them to become productive adults. Establishing life-long healthy dietary preferences can also help reduce the incidence of obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases in middle age, such as cardiovascular disease.
- **Provide a Social Safety Net against social shocks:** During the 2008 Food, Fuel and Finance crisis many governments across Africa chose to expand their school meals programmes to create one of the most extensive social safety nets on the continent. A child fed at school may represent a saving for the family of 10% of household income, a saving which increases for every child fed.
- **Improve educational outcomes:** School meals can boost student enrollment, improve attendance and retention rates, and enhance classroom concentration by providing the necessary nutrients and energy. This leads to improved learning outcomes, particularly for students in low-income settings. For example, Ejore et al. (2020) found that school feeding programs increased attendance and academic performance for pastoralist students in both regular and mobile schools in Turkana, Kenya. School meals can help children from vulnerable families stay in school and grow into healthy adults, which can be a crucial step in breaking the cycle of poverty and hunger.
- **Human capital development:** Human capital development relies not only on quality education but also on the good health and nutrition of children and adolescents. Improving school children's health and nutrition has a transformative impact, leading to better academic performance, higher future incomes, and ultimately, a more productive workforce. This positive impact can extend across generations, breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and fostering long-term economic growth and progress (Africa Union, 2022).
- **Promoting social equity:** School meals are an effective tool for addressing chronic malnutrition among children in Africa. Beyond improved nutrition, these programs enhance pupils overall health, leading to increased participation through regular attendance, reduced dropout rates, and stronger academic outcomes. This, in turn, contributes to greater social equity and economic growth.
- **Stimulating local economies:** School meals can stimulate local agricultural production and boost farmers incomes by creating a reliable market for their produce. These programs improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and other actors along the value chain, strengthening the link between nutrition, agriculture, and social protection. HGSF (HGSF) programs, in particular, can create enabling conditions for smallholders to increase market engagement, mitigate risks associated with agricultural investments, and empower women, thus improving families livelihoods and local economies.

1.5. Sustainable School Meals Programs

School meal programs are crucial for improving the well-being and academic performance of students. However, their objectives and implementation vary significantly between high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (dos Santos et al., 2022). HICs often prioritize dietary diversity and address issues like childhood obesity, leveraging robust funding and infrastructure. LMICs, conversely, primarily use school meals to combat malnutrition and improve school attendance, often relying on external aid and community support. This disparity underscores the need for context-specific strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability of these programs, particularly in LMICs.

Sustainability, as defined by Loughlin et al. (1998) and applied here to school meal programs, refers to a program's capacity to maintain its intended benefits long after initial funding or support ends. This encompasses several key elements: institutionalization, consistent benefit maintenance, financial and resource stability, and active engagement with the community and stakeholders.

From this perspective, three key dimensions of sustainability emerge. First, organizational fit assesses how well an intervention aligns with an organization's existing practices and culture. If a school meal program clashes with existing school routines or the values of the community, it's unlikely to succeed. In this regard, the school meals program requires different levels of coordination with government ministries and local authorities, and districts, municipalities, schools, communities, smallholders and other value chain actors. For effective coordination and implementation of the school meals program, AUDA-NEPAD

(2022) guideline recommends the program to have an institutional home and synergies among different sectors, which ensures that the program is properly lead and coordinated. In this regard, the GCNF (2024) survey shows that 40 African countries have a dedicated coordinating body responsible for leading the implementation of the school meals program.

The second is *institutional capacity* which measures the organization's ability to adapt or redesign the intervention to better suit its specific context. A successful program needs to be flexible enough to adapt to new challenges or opportunities. For instance, adapting menus to local dietary habits and available resources is a prime example of such a context-specific strategy. HGSF (HGSF) programs exemplify such adaptation by linking schools directly with local communities, who then supply fresh, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. Recognizing this, 40 African countries are implementing the HGSF in different forms and this number is expected to grow in the coming years.

The third is *financial viability* which reflects the organization's success in securing the ongoing funding and support necessary for long-term program implementation. Stable funding is particularly critical for school meal programs in Africa, where many countries face significant financial constraints. These constraints often make it difficult to independently fund such programs. To address this challenge, the WFP provides technical assistance to African countries, supporting the development and implementation of effective school meal programs. Furthermore, the WFP promotes HGSF (HGSF) programs, which not only source food locally—boosting local economies and ensuring culturally appropriate meals—

but also contribute to financial sustainability by reducing reliance on potentially expensive imports. Encouragingly, the GCF (2022) reports significant progress, with domestic sources now covering 84% of school meal budgets in Africa, an 8-percentage point increase from 76% in 2013.

Recognizing the pivotal role of school meal programs, the African Union (AU) designated March 1st as the African Day of School Feeding in 2016. This annual observance emphasizes the critical importance of these programs, especially since school meals can often be the only food many children receive in a day. The AU's initiative underscores the urgent need for school feeding programs in Africa and highlights their profound benefits, contributing significantly to long-term sustainability in several ways. First, by establishing the African Day for School Feeding, the AU explicitly connects these initiatives to Agenda 2063 and Objective 2 of the AU Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25). This alignment integrates school feeding into broader continental frameworks, enhancing its institutionalization and sustainability. Second, by framing school feeding within these broader continental frameworks, the AU has effectively embedded these programs within long-term development strategies, enhancing their institutionalization and thus, their sustainability. Finally, this high-level political commitment, coupled with the focus on HGSF, promotes local ownership, strengthens community engagement, and fosters financial viability by stimulating local economies and reducing reliance on external aid – all key elements for ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of school meal programs across Africa.

1.6. Gaps and Challenges

The 2018 FAO study on school food and nutrition programmes in Africa found that SMPs implemented by governments in 41 countries still faced numerous challenges. These challenges include low coverage, lack of dietary guidelines, weak policy frameworks, poor sectoral coordination and weak monitoring and evaluation. Some of these key challenges are further reflected as follows:

- **Limited Funding:** Financial constraints, including insufficient government funding and delays in fee payments from parents, often hinder schools' ability to provide balanced meals. As a result, most of the school meals programs have little diversity, they mainly include cereal (maize/rice) and legume/pulse (beans/green grams) and are often deficient in fruits, vegetables and animal protein that are important sources of nutrients required for optimal growth and development of children and adolescents.
- **Lack or inadequate infrastructure and facilities** such as storage facilities, kitchens and energy saving methods, dining spaces and water supply also impede the implementation of school meal programs. Schools with poor or inadequate storage facilities often experience food spoilage and wastage and have to procure perishable goods on a daily basis and discard any food remains, which is non-economical and inconvenient. Inadequate and intermittent water supply to schools
- also is a key challenge in implementing the school meal program, especially for schools that have not installed water storage facilities. In such cases, water shortage compromises food safety and hygiene increase the risks of contamination and food poisoning to the children.

Multi-sectoral coordination in planning and implementation: Effective resolution of these challenges necessitates more robust communication and collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Labour & Social Protection, and other relevant entities at both the county and national levels. Coordination of stakeholders and activities across many sectors, ministries, lines of authority, funding streams, and competing priorities is crucial for successful implementation of school meals programs. In most cases it may require oversight and encouragement by higher level authorities. For example, In Ghana, the Office of the President has played a key role over the years, and the Vice President's Office oversees Nigeria's HGSP Programme.

Low Production by smallholders: Smallholders tend to produce primarily for their household needs. To access what they need, then, school Meals Programmes have limited options. Food production may not be possible in some locations, or not in the quantity needed; Small-scale farmers may have little or no experience with selling to the school food market; They can work directly with a large number of small-scale farmers individually, buying small quantities.

Limited standards for program effectiveness: Programs could benefit from developing national standards that spell out the requirements for school food services, including not only food and nutritional standards for meals but also requirements for the procurement of the food and services required for an adequate delivery programme. These standards could provide a set of targets for implementation that could then be monitored and adjusted as programs develop. One such target that is relevant for the home-grown side of HGSP is what percentage of total food requirement can be purchased from smallholders.

Other challenges include policy and regulatory complexities to encourage local smallholder participation, Ensuring the quality of food supplied to schools, and Preserving food quality at schools.

1.7. Conclusions and the way forward

SMPs in Africa have evolved significantly, demonstrating a strong commitment to improving child nutrition, educational access, and local economies. These programs, ranging from in-school meals to take-home rations and increasingly incorporating home-grown food sourcing, address critical needs related to malnutrition, school attendance, and local agricultural development. While substantial progress has been made, with increased funding, broader coverage, and growing integration of complementary health interventions, significant challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach focused on strengthening financial sustainability, improving infrastructure and logistical capacity, enhancing inter-sectoral coordination, empowering smallholder farmers, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The future success of school meal programs in Africa hinges on sustained investment, innovative solutions, and a continued commitment to ensuring that every child has access to nutritious food and quality education. Some of the key action areas include:

Innovative financing approaches: Long-term program sustainability hinges on robust financial foundations, requiring us to explore funding mechanisms beyond traditional government allocations. This calls for innovative approaches, such as public-private partnerships, where businesses contribute resources and expertise, and community-based fundraising, which empowers local communities to take ownership of their school meal programs. Advocacy for increased domestic resource allocation is also crucial, ensuring that governments prioritize school meals within their budgets and establish dedicated, transparent budget lines for these programs. Finally, financial transparency and accountability are paramount. Openly demonstrating how program funds are managed and spent builds trust among stakeholders and ensures resources are used effectively to maximize impact.

Strengthening infrastructure and logistics: Effective SMPs depend on robust infrastructure and streamlined logistics. This necessitates strategic investments in school kitchen facilities, adequate storage to maintain food freshness, and comfortable dining spaces for children. Furthermore, developing efficient and cost-effective food procurement and distribution systems is essential to minimize waste and maximize program reach. Critically, access to clean water is paramount for both food preparation and hygiene, underscoring the need to ensure reliable water sources and promote sound sanitation practices in all schools.

Addressing emergency situations: Emergencies, such as conflicts and natural disasters, can severely disrupt school meal programs, jeopardizing children's well-being. To mitigate this risk, countries must develop robust contingency plans that ensure the continued provision of school meals even under these challenging circumstances.

Empowering smallholder farmers: HGSP programs offer a significant opportunity to empower local farmers and communities. To maximize this potential, HGSP programs should prioritize providing smallholder farmers with the necessary training and technical assistance to improve their agricultural practices and access markets. Facilitating direct connections between schools and local farmer cooperatives is also crucial, creating stable and reliable markets for farmers' produce. Finally, transparent and equitable procurement processes must be established to ensure farmers receive fair prices for their goods and that the system operates without corruption.

Robust monitoring and evaluation: Tracking progress and measuring the impact of school meal programs is essential. This requires developing standardized indicators to monitor key program aspects, including the number of children reached and their nutritional status. Regular monitoring and evaluation are crucial for identifying areas for improvement and ensuring accountability. To facilitate this, countries are encouraged to develop interactive dashboards for their school meal programs, ideally in consultation with the Global School Meals Coalition.

Promoting program integration: School meals achieve their greatest impact when integrated with other health and nutrition interventions. Therefore, countries should prioritize scaling up the integration of complementary programs, such as deworming, micronutrient supplementation, and health education, alongside school meal provision. Developing comprehensive packages that address the holistic needs of children, their nutrition, health, and education—is key to maximizing the benefits of these programs.

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2. SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM IN AFRICA: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Schools play a crucial role in the fight against malnutrition, offering hope and opportunity to millions of children. Around the world, many school-aged children face food and nutrition insecurity, which severely affects their growth and future potential. School meals remain an essential safety net which helps to ensure that every child has access to education, health, and nutrition. For the more vulnerable students, enrolling in school, attending regularly and learning is often made more difficult by illness, hunger, and malnutrition. SMPs have therefore gained global recognition for their positive impact. By 2022, about 418 million children worldwide were receiving school meals, a significant rise from the numbers reported in 2020 (Wineman, A. et al., 2022).

Food insecurity and malnutrition affect the educational attainment, family life, and overall health and wellbeing of children and adolescents attending school. There is considerable evidence indicating that malnutrition and food insecurity remain a major global public health concern in developing countries, particularly in the sub-Saharan African region (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, 2023; Grebmer et al, 2023 & Ajao et al, 2023). Of all regions, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion. (UNESCO, n.d). In 2021, governments worked together to find better ways to support schoolchildren while promoting sustainable diets and food systems. This effort led to the creation of the global School Meals Coalition, launched during the UN Food Systems Summit in

October 2021. When students are well-nourished, they are more likely to attend school regularly and are less likely to miss classes due to illness or fatigue. Healthy students are better equipped to focus on their studies, engage in classroom activities, and participate in extracurricular activities, leading to a more enriching educational experience. Consistent attendance contributes to better academic performance and increases the likelihood of students completing their education.

SMPs provide an important new opportunity to assist low-income families and feed hungry children while reserving food at home for others and improving household food security status. Beyond the immediate benefits to students, school meals programs also contribute to broader societal goals, such as poverty reduction and economic development. By promoting education and improving academic outcomes, these programmes help break the cycle of poverty and empower individuals to build better futures for themselves and their communities. Moreover, a well-educated population is essential for driving economic growth and fostering social progress.

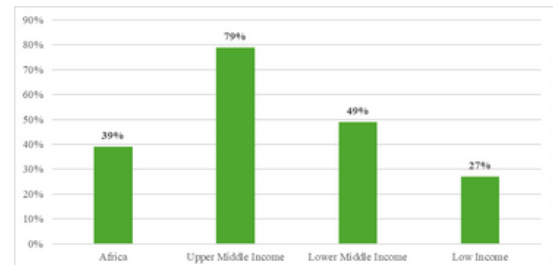
School meals also provide nutritious meals for schoolchildren, prepared from locally sourced food items grown by smallholder farmers in the surrounding communities. The meals are fortified or supplemented as necessary, and pupils receive regular deworming treatments, ensuring improved nutrition and health outcomes. By sourcing food items from the farmers, the program offers opportunities for economic empowerment. Furthermore, the program strengthens the capacity of local food processors and traders, contributing to the development of resilient food systems. SMPs support inclusive education and social protection while diversifying

agricultural activity. As a food-based safety net program, it is also intended to help promote food security in beneficiary households. Thus, the school meals program aligns multiple stakeholders – children, households, farmers, communities, and government. It facilitates sustainable and socially inclusive food system transitions across spheres of influence.

In Africa, SMPs are reaching more children than ever before. In 2024, 86.86 million children benefit daily, compared to 65.9 million in 2022 and a significant increase from 38.4 million in 2023 (AU, 2021, 2022 and GCNF, 2024). This expansion aligns with the goals set by the AU Assembly. While the number of children receiving school meals in Africa is increasing, coverage remains significantly lower than in other regions. Currently, only 39% of African children benefit from school feeding programs, compared to 51% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 42% in Europe, Central, and North America (GCNF, 2024).

This disparity within Africa itself is particularly striking. A clear correlation exists between a country's income level and its school meal coverage with high income countries shaving higher coverage rates. Upper-middle-income African nations boast a 79% coverage rate, demonstrating a strong capacity to invest in these programs. Conversely, low-income countries struggle to reach just 27% of their children. This suggests that financial constraints could be a major barrier to expanding school meal programs in the poorest nations, highlighting the need for targeted support and investment to bridge this gap.

Figure 3: School Feeding Coverage rate in Africa by income group (%)



Source; GCNF, 2024

2.2. Activities and Achievements

The school meals program initiatives have continued to be instrumental in improving nutrition, increasing access to education, and stimulating local economies across Africa. This section highlights key activities conducted as part of these programs during 2023-2024, showcasing achievements, challenges faced, and innovative solutions implemented. The SMP coverage rate in 2022 based on GCNF report 2023 was 16% with Botswana 91%, eSwatini (87%) South Africa (72%), Cape Verde (64%) and Lesotho (60%) have the highest rates at country level (GCNF, 2021). There has been a positive trajectory in school meals numbers (71%) of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Countries that experienced the fastest growth in percentage terms included Mauritania, Congo, Mozambique, and Cameroon (GCNF, 2021).

According to the latest GCNF survey report (2024), 86.86 million children benefit daily, compared to 65.9 million in 2022 and a significant increase from the figure in 2013 which was 38.4 million children. This expansion aligns with the goals set by the AU Assembly and highlights the

importance of school meals programs not only as a means to combat hunger but also as a vital tool for fostering education and good health among the youth in Africa.

Due to the multifaceted nature of school meal programs, a multi-sectoral approach is more cost-effective than a singular focus on one sector. This underscores the importance of collaboration across various sectors to ensure the success of these programs. Recognizing the diverse benefits that school meal initiatives offer, countries are increasingly integrating multiple policies to enhance their effectiveness. According to the latest GCNF survey (2024), 91% of African countries now have a national school feeding policy, reflecting a 3-percentage point improvement from 89% in 2022.

Beyond school meal programs, many countries are implementing complementary initiatives to maximize their impact. These include practical measures like promoting handwashing, conducting height and weight measurements, testing for anemia, and providing deworming treatments. Furthermore, some countries are integrating related educational topics into their curricula, covering areas such as food and nutrition, agriculture, environmental awareness, hygiene, general health, and reproductive health. While all countries have adopted at least one of these complementary activities, only a small fraction (14%) have implemented a comprehensive approach encompassing more than nine activities.

One notable achievement is the expansion of HGSF programs across the continent, reaching millions of students and stimulating local economies. HGSF

programmes have demonstrated positive results in strengthening local food systems and enhancing farmer-to-school linkages, leading to increased sales for local farmers. However, the inconsistent integration of support to agricultural practices and value-chain development for smallholder farmers and the lack of a systematic food systems strategy remain as constraining gaps and call for areas needing further attention to fully realize the benefits of HGSF initiatives.

In sub-Saharan Africa, it is reported that 71% of the programs engaged directly with small scale farmers by having the program or the individual schools purchase food from them. Most commonly, farmers provide green vegetables and other vegetables, in addition to grains/cereals, roots/tubers, legumes, and fruits (GCNF, 2021).

The following are some examples where access school meals programs have been expanded in the last few years.

- **Kenya:** the school meals program, launched in 2022 with support from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the government of Kenya, has served over 1.2 million children with meals prepared from locally sourced ingredients. This program has not only provided nutritious meals to students but also supported local farmers, with over 20,000 tons of maize, beans, and potatoes produced in 2023.
- **Ghana:** the "One Village, One Product" initiative, part of the Ghana's HGSF program, has reached over 150,000 children with meals prepared from locally grown crops. This initiative has been particularly successful in promoting local food production and consumption, contributing to the country's food security and economic growth.

- **Senegal:** The nationwide school meals program in Senegal, launched in 2024, has served over 300,000 pupils with meals prepared from local ingredients, demonstrating the program's potential to scale and reach a broader audience.
- **Mozambique:** The Educating Children Together (ECT-3) project in Mozambique's Nampula province is addressing malnutrition and boosting education for over 92,000 students in 160 schools. By providing fortified school meals and building resilient classrooms, the programme improves student nutrition, attendance, and learning outcomes.

2.3. CAPACITY BUILDING AND TRAINING

The school meals program has also emerged as a vital tool for capacity building, fostering connections between schools and local farmers. By sourcing ingredients locally, these programs not only enhance the nutritional value of meals but also support the local economy. Additionally, training for kitchen staff and cooks is an integral component, equipping them with the necessary skills to prepare healthy, balanced meals. This holistic approach not only benefits students' health but also strengthens community ties and promotes sustainable agricultural practices. Ultimately, the program serves as a bridge between education, nutrition, and local agriculture, creating a more resilient and informed community.

For instance, in Burundi, a total of 398,400 parents volunteer in the National School Meals Program, although these positions are unpaid. Similarly, in Guinea-Bissau, less than a quarter of the 2,550 cooks in the School Canteen Program receive some form of remuneration. In Uganda, over 10,000 cooks and teachers participated in a

comprehensive capacity-building initiative facilitated by the WFP. This training focused on menu planning, food preparation techniques, and nutritional education, resulting in healthier meals that better meet students' dietary needs.

The Ghana's "Enhancing School Meals Program" project equipped 1,500 educators and food handlers with skills in food safety and hygiene, leading to improved food handling practices and a decrease in foodborne illnesses. Likewise, Kenya's National School Meals Program trained over 5,000 school staff in food management and procurement processes from 2022 to 2024, significantly enhancing the efficiency of sourcing food from local farmers.

Additionally, Senegal launched capacity-building workshops in 2024 that reached approximately 2,000 school personnel, emphasizing the integration of nutrition education into school curricula. These achievements underscore the pivotal role of training in cultivating a workforce capable of delivering effective school meals programs, ultimately contributing to improved health and educational outcomes for millions of African children.

2.4. INNOVATIONS IN SCHOOLS MEALS PROGRAM

2.4.1. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks are crucial for informing evidence-based decision-making and enhancing school meal programs. To achieve this, it is essential to invest in robust data management systems and to build capacity for data-driven analysis. Such investments enhance program accountability, transparency, and impact

assessment. Evidence-based policymaking will not only support the scaling and sustainability of these initiatives but also facilitate the mobilization of necessary investments for school meals.

Many African nations rely on paper-based systems to monitor daily attendance and track school meals data. However, these systems often lead to delays, inconsistencies, and a lack of transparency. To overcome these challenges, countries must establish robust M&E frameworks and prioritize digitizing data collection processes. In this regard, the effort of the School Meals Coalition Data and Monitoring Initiative is commendable. This initiative aims to support member governments not only by providing advanced monitoring tools, but also by focusing on building robust systems, refining processes, and strengthening the capacity of personnel.

Some countries have made significant strides in enhancing data and monitoring systems for their school meal programs. This Section presents case studies from Ghana and Namibia, which have integrated their school meal programs with robust data management information systems. These case studies offer valuable insights for other countries planning to implement similar initiatives.

Box 1: Case studies (1-3)

Ghana: Data for Transforming School Meals Program

The Ghana School Meals Programme (GSFP), launched in 2005, now benefits over 3.8 million pupils. However, initial challenges with manual data collection hindered its effectiveness. To address these issues, the GSFP, with support from the World Food Programme (WFP), implemented a digital monitoring system. This system revolutionized data management, enabling real-time monitoring, improved decision-making, and enhanced stakeholder collaboration.

This success demonstrates the transformative power of data-driven decision-making in social programs. Ghana, leveraging this experience, is now leading the way in improving data and monitoring systems for school meal programs within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Key lessons learned emphasize the critical importance of accurate and efficient data collection. Ensuring consistent internet access and expanding GPS tracking capabilities are crucial for further system enhancement.

Source: Regional Centre of Excellence against Hunger and Malnutrition (CERFAM), 2024.

Namibia: School Meals Information Management System

The Namibia School Meals Programme (NSFP) faced challenges including ensuring equitable access to nutritious meals, operational inefficiencies, and resource constraints. To address these issues, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, in collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), developed the Namibia School Meals Information Management System (NaSIS).

NaSIS has significantly improved food security and nutrition for over 400,000 children by optimizing resource utilization and reducing waste. It has also empowered local communities by prioritizing local food procurement and informed policy decisions through timely and accurate data.

Key learnings from NaSIS include the importance of community engagement, strong government support, active stakeholder participation, and cross-sectoral partnerships for the successful implementation and sustainability of such systems. NaSIS serves as a valuable model for other countries seeking to improve their school meals programs through innovative and data-driven approaches.

Source: CERFAM, 2023, accessed online from [here](#)

Nairobi's "Dishina County" Program: Integration Digital Money into School Meals

Nairobi's "Dishina County" school meals program, launched in 2023, provides daily nutritious meals to over 215,000 students in public primary schools and ECD centers. Building upon a legacy of school meals programs, the initiative integrates mobile money technology for convenient parental payments, efficient processing, and improved transparency.

The program operates on a cost-sharing model, with the county government covering 85% of the costs. While demonstrating positive impacts on school enrollment, attendance, and student nutrition, reaching children from extremely impoverished households remains a challenge. Expanding the program requires careful planning and resource mobilization to accommodate growing demand.

2.4.2. Energy for School Meals

According to the GCNF (2024) report, 86.86 million children currently receive daily school meals in Africa, and this number is projected to increase in the coming years. However, the preparation of these meals often relies on rudimentary biomass stoves and fuels, posing significant risks to the health of students and cooks, straining school finances, and negatively impacting the local environment.

Recent estimates by the Energy Sector Management Assistance Program (ESMAP) (2023) reveal that schools in Sub-Saharan Africa consume 8 million tons of firewood annually, resulting in the emission of 12–14 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e). When these emissions are monetized, the resulting cost of inefficient cooking practices amounts to a staggering US\$575–668 million per year. The study further indicated that switching from traditional stoves to more efficient biomass stove with a thermal efficiency greater than 30% would reduce the emission of 135-160 tCO₂e per year while switching to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) or biogas stoves would reduce emission by 140–180 tCO₂e per year.

Below are case studies from pilot programs in Africa that aim to transition their school meals energy consumption from traditional, less efficient methods to more sustainable and energy-efficient approaches.

Box 2: Case Study 4

Lesotho: Energy-Efficient Electric Pressure Cookers for Schools Meals

Lesotho launched a pilot program in 2022, introducing energy-efficient electric pressure cookers (EPCs) in five semi urban schools with support from the WFP. The pilot program demonstrated that EPCs significantly reduced energy consumption compared to LPG (four times less) and firewood (ten times less). This translated to a cooking cost per student per day that was approximately one-third that of LPG and one-sixth that of wood fuel. EPCs also proved to be at least 20% faster than other methods, particularly compared to firewood, and required less cleaning time and water due to the absence of soot and burned food residues.

The finding from the pilot program highlights the potential for scaling up the use of EPCs in schools with electricity access, offering substantial cost savings and contributing to improved health and environmental outcomes.

2.4.3. School Meals and Environmental Issues

The successful implementation of School meals programs depends on healthy, resilient and sustainable food systems. This includes climate and environmental changes that have reciprocal connections with food systems (Bremer & Raiten, 2023). This is mainly due to the fact that the physical environment, including climate, affects the amount and quality of food produced.

For this, school meals are increasingly recognized as a crucial investment for governments, particularly in the global South, to address critical challenges facing children and to catalyze a transformation towards more sustainable food systems.

SMPs constitute one of the most established and extensive components of public food systems, currently reaching 86.86 million children in Africa every day. Given the significant influence of government policies on these programs and their unparalleled reach and scale, national school meals programs present an exceptional opportunity to implement planet-friendly policies. These policies not only contribute to environmental sustainability but also deliver substantial co-benefits for child health and the broader societal well-being.

Box 3: Case studies (5-7)**Ouagadougou: Integrating Environment into School Meal**

Ouagadougou launched a pilot school meals program in 2023 as part of the "Nourrir la ville" initiative, building upon a longstanding tradition of community-backed school meals. The program currently provides nutritious meals to 4,635 students across 12 schools, focusing on enhancing educational outcomes, alleviating hunger, and promoting well-being.

Key features of the program are its integration of nutrition education and environmental awareness into the curriculum and the use of the DINO app to streamline meal delivery. The initiative has effectively promoted agroecology, advocating for environmentally sustainable farming methods, and has contributed to fostering healthier eating habits among students. Moving forward, efforts are underway to overcome these challenges and further extend the program's benefits to a larger number of students and communities.

Source: Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2024, 6th MUFPP Regional Forum in Africa

Antananarivo: An Urban Agriculture Approach to School Meals Program

Antananarivo addressed malnutrition and food insecurity by integrating urban agriculture into its school meal programs. This initiative establishes urban plant nurseries, providing seedlings for school gardens. Collaboration with partners like FAO and AfriFOODlinks provides crucial support.

A successful pilot project involving 17 schools has demonstrated the program's effectiveness, benefiting 11,302 students with nutritious meals prepared using produce from their own gardens. This model promotes sustainable food systems and aims to contribute to long-term food security and community resilience. The approach improved students' diets and overall well-being.

Source: Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2024, 6th MUFPP Regional Forum in Africa

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): School Feeding in Fragile Setting

The Democratic Republic of Congo's 2016-2025 Education Sector Plan aimed to provide school meals in 3,000 rural schools to improve access and retention. However, a worsening humanitarian crisis and funding shortfalls forced the World Food Programme (WFP) to significantly reduce its activities. A 2013 prioritization exercise resulted in a 40% reduction in school feeding, and the number of supported schools dropped from 1,000 in 2014 to fewer than half that number in 2015. More recently, in 2023/24 school year, 1,440 schools were closed affecting 532,677 children.

Despite these setbacks, SMPs implemented in some districts yielded positive outcomes. These programs helped meet students' nutritional needs and modestly improved dietary diversity, particularly for children from the poorest families who often have less varied diets at home. SMPs also contributed to increased enrollment, attendance (by an average of seven days per school year, equally for girls and boys), and retention, especially benefiting internally displaced persons (IDP) and the poorest households. Furthermore, school feeding programs improved students' psychosocial well-being, leading to increased happiness, better homework habits, and improved classroom attentiveness.

Source: WFP, 2020

2.5. Challenges Facing School Meals Programs in Africa

Despite the significant potential of school meals programs in Africa to enhance food security, improve nutrition, and promote local agriculture, various challenges hinder their effectiveness. These programs often struggle with inconsistent access to nutritious food, limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient community engagement. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to overcome them and ensure that school meals initiatives achieve their intended outcomes.

Inconsistent access to nutritious food: Many school meals programs in Africa struggle to provide consistent access to nutritious meals. For instance, a 2023 study in Burkina Faso highlighted that, despite using local produce, many menus still lacked essential nutrients, contributing to malnutrition among students. This underscores the importance of balanced meals that promote health and development rather than just filling stomachs. Similarly, a study conducted in Malawi in 2022 revealed significant challenges in accessing nutritious food, with some schools facing deficits of up to 50%.

This lack of sufficient food resources directly impacts the health and academic performance of students, emphasizing the need for robust supply chains.

Limited Funding: Limited funding remains a significant barrier for school meals programs across Africa. Many governments prioritize urgent needs like healthcare and infrastructure over education and nutrition, leading to underfunded initiatives. The other issue is the disruption of funds. The WFP highlighted that inadequate funding has led to meal disruptions, particularly in 2023 when extended dry spells exacerbated food shortages. The reliance on international donors makes these programs vulnerable to abrupt funding cuts, especially during economic downturns. In the same token, a study in Ghana revealed a heavy dependence on external funding sources limiting the sustainability and growth of local school meals programs. The African Development Bank also noted significant funding constraints impacting effective implementation.

Inadequate Infrastructure: Successful school meals programs require proper infrastructure, including kitchens and storage facilities. However, many schools in Africa lack these essential resources, hindering meal preparation and service. For instance, a study conducted in Ethiopia in 2022 showed that many schools lacked adequate cooking facilities, complicating the preparation and serving of meals. This limitation can lead to inefficient food use and potential health risks for students.

Lack of Community Engagement: Effective school meals programs rely on community involvement. However, many countries struggle to engage parents and local communities in these initiatives. In countries such as Kenya that low

community engagement resulted in reduced participation in school meals programs. This lack of support can weaken the program's effectiveness and sustainability. Though community engagement is vital for the success of school meals programs, many countries face challenges in fostering this collaboration.

Supply Chain Constraints: School meal programs intended to leverage local agriculture often encounter supply chain challenges. Poor infrastructure, such as inadequate roads and storage, can hinder the timely delivery of food supplies. In rural Nigeria and Ghana, farmers frequently struggle to transport fresh produce to schools, resulting in inconsistencies in meal provision, particularly during adverse weather conditions.

Capacity and Training of Personnel: The successful implementation of school meals programs hinges on well-trained personnel. Insufficient training among school staff can lead to poor management of logistics and food safety. However, skill gaps among cooks in kitchen operations are reported. For instance, in Zambia, in 2022, it was reported that many schools lacked the expertise necessary for effective kitchen operations, resulting in inefficient resource use and potential health risks. Lack of proper training provision for farmers is also affecting their engagement in school meals programs.

Cultural and Social Factors: Cultural preferences can significantly influence student participation in school meals programs. Meals that do not align with local tastes may lead to disinterest among students. In some communities, gender dynamics can affect meal distribution, with girls receiving less preference for meals compared to boys. This disparity can undermine the program's objectives.

Political Instability and Conflict: Political instability and conflict severely disrupt school meals programs across Africa. Countries like South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo face ongoing violence, which hampers food access and school operations. Prolonged conflicts often result in widespread displacement, exacerbating food insecurity. In South Sudan, over 7 million people face food insecurity, directly impacting school meals initiatives.

Climatic Conditions: Smallholder farmers in Nigeria heavily rely on rainfed agriculture, which leads to seasonal fluctuations in food supply. This dependence limits the consistency of food availability for school meals programs. Adverse weather conditions and pest infestations can further constrain food production, making it difficult for smallholder farmers to meet the demand of school meals programs. When local farmers cannot meet the demand, food vendors often resort to alternative sources, which may lack proper oversight regarding food safety and nutrition, undermining program goals.

Monitoring and Evaluation Challenges: Effective monitoring and evaluation are crucial for improving school meals programs. However, many African nations lack comprehensive data collection systems to assess program impacts. Insufficient data can hinder efforts to secure funding and support, as stakeholders may remain unaware of the programs' benefits.

2.6. Conclusion and the way forward

African countries face significant challenges in implementing school meals programs, including HGSF programs. The inconsistent access to nutritious food, limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of community engagement are some of the major challenges faced by African countries in implementing school meals programs. These challenges highlight the need for African governments, international organizations, and communities to work together to address the complexities of school meals programs in the continent.

The following are key action areas in the coming years to address challenges related to school meals programs in Africa.

a) **Data-Driven Decision Making:** The success of Ghana's GSFP highlights the transformative power of data-driven decision making. Implementing robust data collection and monitoring systems, as exemplified by NaSIS in Namibia, is crucial for program effectiveness, resource allocation, and evidence-based policy adjustments.

b) **Technology and Innovation:** The "Dishi na County" program in Nairobi demonstrates the potential of integrating technology, such as mobile money, to improve program efficiency, transparency, and accessibility.

c) **Integrating environmental sustainability and local food systems into school feeding programs can significantly enhance their impact:** Both the Ouagadougou and Antananarivo case studies demonstrate the value of connecting school meals to local food production and environmental awareness. By incorporating environmental sustainability and local food systems, these programs can contribute to broader social and environmental goals, such as improving food security, supporting local economies, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

d) Enhancing government financing:

Advocate for increased government budgets and timely fund disbursement for school meals programs. Adopting innovative financing mechanisms such as public-private approach and strengthening community engagement in the school meals program.

e) Improving logistics, storage, and distribution mechanisms:

Adopting local procurement systems like the HGSF model is crucial to shorten supply chains and reduce transportation delays. In addition, training local school staff in food handling and storage best practices could help decrease food spoil and foster a swift distribution.

f) Local community engagement: Although there is an improvement in local participation in school meals programs where the community engages mainly through providing agricultural inputs, logistics and supply chain and meal preparation in school, there must be an active involvement of the community in decision making processes. The introduction of local community in decision making processes ensures accountability.



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3. THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL MEALS AND COMPLEMENTARY SCHOOL BASED INTERVENTIONS

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Education, nutrition, health, and national development are deeply interconnected. These factors are particularly crucial for children and adolescents, as they directly influence their future productivity and long-term outcomes. To effectively address these interconnected factors, a more integrated and systematic approach to school health and nutrition is crucial. This requires coordinated action to implement effective, multi-component policies and programs at a scale (UNESCO et al., 2020). One such approach is integrating health and nutrition components into the school meals programs (Verguet et al. 2020).

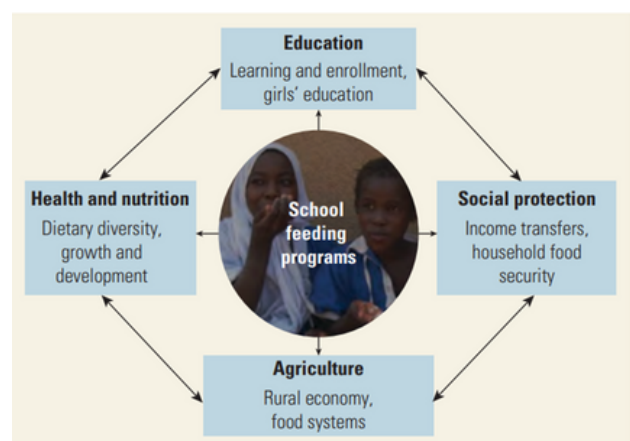
As illustrated in Figure 1 below, school meals have a multifaceted impact that extends well beyond simply providing meals to children. These programs are associated with improved educational outcomes, including increased enrollment rates and reduced dropouts and repetition rates. By ensuring that children receive nutritious meals, school meals enhance their ability to focus and learn, ultimately fostering a more conducive learning environment.

Moreover, school meals contribute significantly to better health and nutrition by promoting dietary diversity, which is essential for combating malnutrition and ensuring that children receive a broad spectrum of nutrients. This improved nutrition not only supports physical growth but also boosts cognitive development, leading to enhanced academic performance.

In addition to these benefits, school meals play a crucial role in strengthening community social protection by providing income transfers and improving household food security. These programs help vulnerable families stabilize their economic situation, reducing food insecurity and its associated stressors.

Furthermore, school meals stimulate the local economy by creating demand for local agricultural products. They often include provisions for technical assistance to smallholder farmers, helping them improve their production methods and access stable markets for their goods. This symbiotic relationship not only supports local farmers but also fosters economic resilience within communities, contributing to overall development. By investing in school meals programs, countries can create a ripple effect that enhances educational, nutritional, and economic outcomes, ultimately leading to stronger, healthier communities.

Figure 3: School Feeding Coverage rate in Africa by income group (%)



3.2. REVIEW OF EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACTS OF SCHOOL MEALS AND COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMS

3.2.1. EDUCATION

School meals programs in Africa are implemented through a diverse array of approaches, including HGSF, take-home rations, community-based initiatives, and partnerships with NGOs. These programs aim to improve educational outcomes and child nutrition. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students receiving school meals has shown a modest increase. In 2021, an estimated 65.9 million children across 51 African countries benefited from school meals (African Union, 2022), a slight rise from the 65.4 million reached in 2020. The figure reached 86.86 million children in the 2022/23 school year, indicating a 6% increase from the figure reported in 2021 (GCNF, 2024).

Evidence from school meals programs demonstrates significant positive impacts on learning outcomes, increased lifetime earning potential, and enhanced economic productivity. For instance, research by (Aurino et al., 2023, Lundborg et al., 2022, and Abay et al., 2021) has shown that these programs can effectively improve children's educational outcomes. These interventions have proven instrumental in increasing school enrollment and improving learning outcomes for children. For instance, in Burundi, schools implementing school meals supported by WFP exhibited higher attendance (2% higher than the national average), lower repetition rates (1.5% lower than the national average), and lower dropout rates (3.6% lower dropout rate than the national average). It was also revealed that school meals contributed to social protection, accounting for an average of 8 percent of

household consumption expenditures and up to 14 % of household food consumption. Similarly, school attendance increased to 73%, with dropout rates in WFP supported schools significantly lower than the national average in Ethiopia (WFP Regional Bureau for Eastern Africa, 2024).

3.2.2. HEALTH AND NUTRITION

School meal programs offer significant benefits that extend far beyond the classroom, profoundly impacting children's health and nutritional status. These programs act as a crucial safety net, particularly in food-insecure regions, contributing to improved nutrition and long-term well-being. Many children, especially in developing countries, arrive at school hungry and undernourished. School meals provide a vital source of essential nutrients, helping to address micronutrient deficiencies and reduce malnutrition. This supports healthy growth and development, crucial for children's physical and cognitive development, leading to better concentration, learning, and overall potential (Aurino et al., 2023 & Lundborg et al.). By improving children's nutritional status, these programs also contribute to better overall health, reducing rates of stunting and wasting, strengthening immune systems, and decreasing susceptibility to illness.

The positive effects of school meals extend beyond childhood. Improved nutrition during formative years has lasting impacts on health, cognitive function, and even economic productivity in adulthood. As research indicates (Aurino et al., 2023, Lundborg et al., 2022, & Abay et al., 2021), these programs can increase lifetime well-being and potential, leading to enhanced economic productivity. Cohen, et al (2021) have also shown that school meals improve children's diets directly by providing healthy foods sourced locally (such as vegetables, whole grains, etc.).

Furthermore, school meals effectively reduce malnutrition and combat micronutrient deficiencies by promoting the consumption of diverse, nutritious, healthy, and sustainable diets (UNESCO et al., 2022). To maximize the benefits of school meal programs, strong nutrition standards are crucial. Beyond direct nutritional benefits, research suggests positive indirect effects. Cohen et al. (2018) found that consuming healthy school meals may lead to decreased consumption of less healthy foods outside of school, potentially due to increased satiety from nutrient-dense, high-fiber meals. Furthermore, when school meals are provided at no cost, families can allocate those funds towards other essential needs, potentially reducing food insecurity.

There is a perception that school meals programs are a costly intervention, particularly in low-income countries. However, studies demonstrate substantial returns on investment. The recent report by UNESCO et al. (2023) indicates that for every 1 US dollar invested in school feeding programs, there can be a return of approximately 9 US dollars and school programs that address mental health can potentially provide a return on investment of US\$21.5 for every US\$1 invested. Evidence specific to Africa also indicates positive education and health benefits of school meals programs. For instance, in Ethiopia, the overall benefit-cost ratio of school meal program is \$4. That means for every \$1 invested in the school meals program, the overall average benefit would be \$4 (Memirie et al., 2024). Such statistics underscore not only the financial viability of school meal programs but also their critical role in enhancing the well-being and prospects of children in low-income regions. By investing in these programs, we are essentially investing in a healthier, more educated generation, which can lead to long-term economic growth and social stability.

3.2.3. Social Protection

School meals alleviate the financial burden on families, freeing up resources for other essential needs. They can also serve as a platform for promoting healthy eating habits by exposing children to a variety of nutritious foods, potentially influencing their dietary patterns. In essence, school meal programs are a powerful tool for investing in children's future, laying the foundation for better health, improved educational outcomes, and enhanced economic opportunities, ultimately contributing to a more prosperous and equitable society.

3.2.4. Local Economies

The benefits of school meals are more maximized when there is a sustained and predictable demand for locally produced food. Recognizing this, the Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF)[1] program has gained significant traction in many African countries to address various development challenges. This approach strategically links school meals with local agricultural production, thereby supporting local farmers through access to a stable market and fostering rural economic growth (Sitali, 2021). This approach aligns with broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as the aim to eradicate hunger, ensure quality education, and promote sustainable economic growth (Aurino et al., 2023).

The HGSF programs not only nourish children but also stimulate agricultural development and create jobs. As reported by UNESCO et al. (2023), HGSF generates over 1,000 direct jobs for every 100,000 children fed. This translates to a potential of over 2.5 million direct jobs across Africa if all primary school children benefited from these programs. HGSF programs significantly improve smallholder farmers' incomes and enhance their food security. Numerous studies, such as that by

Metwally et al. (2020), have documented that these programs increase smallholder farmers' incomes and food security through creating demand for vegetables, cereals, and other staple foods cultivated by smallholder farmers. By creating stable market opportunities, HGSF programs have helped reduce losses, particularly for vegetable farmers, and significantly improved their profitability. The guaranteed market access provided by HGSF further stimulates agricultural productivity and mitigates marketing risks for farmers, especially those producing perishable goods like vegetables and legumes (Bundy et al., 2018).

[1] AUDA-NEPAD (2022) report indicates that more than 40 African Union (AU) Member States are implementing HGSF, albeit in different forms given the varying contexts

3.3. School Meals Program and Education Outcomes

According to the GCNF 2024 survey, the SMPs fed 86.86 million students across the continent during the 2022-2023 school year. This represents an increase of approximately 21 million students from 65.9 million in 2022. The coverage and scale of school meal programs in Africa have significantly expanded, with domestic resources serving as the primary source of funding. In 2024, domestic funding (including domestic NGOs and private sector) accounted for over 83% of school meal programs across the continent, although substantial inter-country variations exist. For example, countries like Botswana, Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe fully finance their school meal programs domestically. Conversely, in nations such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Malawi, and Cameroon, development partners contribute more than 95% of school meal program funding.

Government expenditure on education has shown a continuous increase for sub-Saharan African countries (SSA) except between 2021 and 2022 where the government expenditure as percentage of GDP has shown a downturn trend. However, the trend starts to increase after 2022 with the figure in 2023 standing slightly above 4.8%. The trend for Northern African (NA) countries, however, shows a declining trend after 2020.

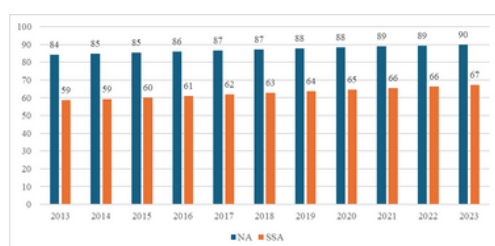
Figure 3: School Feeding
Coverage rate in Africa by income group (%)



Source: UNESCO, 2024

Though school meal programs are only one component of education expenditure, it gives an indication of how the increase in expenditure on education is reflected in education outcome indicators. For this, trends in education outcomes indicators are presented in this section.

Figure 6: Primary Completion Rate (PCR) (%)

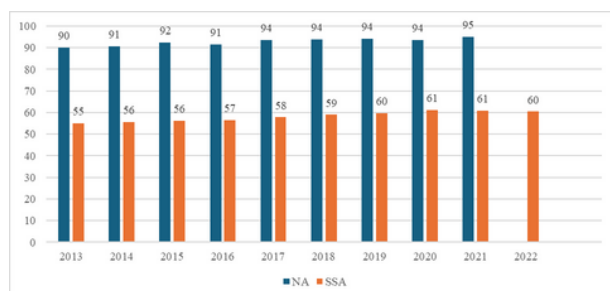


Source: UNESCO, 2024

Primary completion rates in SSA have increased by 8 percentage points between 2013 and 2023, from 59% in 2013 to 67% in 2023. In North Africa, this rate increased from 84% to 90% during the same period. This positive trend in primary completion rates is likely attributable, in part, to the growing emphasis on school meal programs by African governments.

Another key educational outcome expected to be influenced by school meal programs is primary school survival rate. While modest improvements have been observed in SSA countries (from 55% in 2013 to 60% in 2022), survival rates in Northern African countries have seen a more substantial increase, rising from 90% to 95% during this period.

Figure 7: Survival rate to the last grade of primary education (%)



Source: UNESCO, 2024

3.4. Showcase of the Impact of School Meals on Education, Health, Nutrition, Local Economy: Case studies

In Section 3.2, it was presented that the school meals program has significant and positive benefit students in various areas domains, including education, health, nutrition, social protection, and local economies. This has been documented by numerous studies. In this section, we present case studies from different regions in Africa that highlight the tangible effects of school meal programs on health, education, social protection, nutrition, and local economies.

Box 4: Case Studies (8-9)

Ethiopia and Malawi: School Meal Program Yield in better education and Health Outcomes

ETHIOPIA

Though school meals program (SMP) in Ethiopia dates to 1994, the program started in Addis Ababa in 2019. Currently benefiting nearly 700,000 students annually, this program is entirely funded by the city administration. The program operates for 176 days a year, prioritizing locally sourced food and providing jobs for over 40,000 cooks.

SMP in Ethiopia demonstrate significant positive impacts. Compared to non-beneficiaries, SMP participants exhibit higher retention rates (2.6 times higher) and primary completion rates (30% higher), translating to an average of 2.3 additional years of academic achievement. Beyond educational gains, SMPs contribute to improved health outcomes, averting an estimated 475 cases of anemia per 1,000 beneficiaries, leading to 5 Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) saved per 1,000 children. Furthermore, the program fosters local economic development, with the Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) program transferring USD 50 million to smallholder farmers in 2022/23, supporting local food systems and livelihoods. The SMP has also long-term positive effects on children's future wage earnings. Children who benefit from SMP will get an average increase in lifetime income of approximately USD 602 for men and USD 828 for women.

Source: Memirie et al., 2024

MALAWI

Malawi's National Social Support Programme II (MNSSP II, established 2018) includes school meals as a key component, also highlighted in the National Education Sector Investment Plan 2020-2030. Collaborating with partners, the Ministry of Education provides daily porridge-based meals and seasonally available fruits and vegetables in food-insecure districts. Additionally, take-home maize rations (or cash equivalents) are distributed, primarily to upper-grade girls and orphaned boys, during the lean season at 694 primary schools and throughout the academic year at 167 schools.

SMPs are found to be positively associated with primary school retention, with participating children achieving an average of 0.6 additional years of education. SMPs also increase the likelihood of employment outside the primary sector by 17%, translating to higher probabilities of finding work in manufacturing or services. Specifically, participation in SMPs increases lifetime income by approximately USD 295 for men and USD 343 for women. Moreover, a cohort of 1,000 children benefiting from SMPs would experience a cumulative four additional years lived in good health compared to a similar cohort without SMP benefits.

Source: Forzy, T. et al, 2024.

Box 5: Case Studies (10-12)**Chad: Breaking Barriers for Girls' Education**

The Breaking Barriers for Girls' Education (BBGE) program, implemented by a UN consortium (WFP, UNICEF, UNFPA) from 2019 to 2022, addressed significant barriers to girls' education. Prior to the program, high dropout rates, primarily due to early marriage and unplanned pregnancies, hindered girls' educational progress. In 2018, only 20% of youth were enrolled in secondary school, with a significantly lower rate (14%) for girls.

The program integrated various interventions, including school meals, student training on health and nutrition, and income-generating activities for parents. Evaluation demonstrated improved enrollment and attendance rates, with program schools achieving 93% and 70%, respectively. Cash grants and school meals were identified as the most effective interventions in overcoming barriers to education. Furthermore, the evaluation highlighted the importance of prioritizing resource allocation towards the depth of interventions within a smaller number of schools to maximize program impact.

Source: WFP, UNFPA and UNICEF, 2023.

Ghana: Linking School Meals Program with Local Economies

The Ghana School Feeding Program (GSFP) reaches over 2 million primary school children in 2015, employing local caterers to procure food from local markets. To enhance local food procurement, the Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) pilot introduced contractual agreements between caterers and farmers, fostering direct linkages.

While the HGSF pilot increased the share of food purchased from smallholders, challenges remain. Delayed program disbursements and a significant reliance on market traders limited the direct impact on farmers. The analysis revealed no significant impact on farm or household income, suggesting the need for robust financial mechanisms, improved market information flow, and strengthened government support to effectively integrate smallholder farmers into the GSFP. Despite these challenges, the program demonstrates positive outcomes for children, improving learning, cognition, and nutrition.

Source: Gelli et al (2021).

Rwanda: School Meals Program as a Human Capital Development

The Government of Rwanda endorsed a comprehensive National School Feeding Policy (NSFP) in 2019, significantly expanding its budget in the following two years. Implemented with universal coverage since October 2021, the NSFP has increased school feeding participation from 600,000 to over 3.6 million children, supporting Rwanda's human capital development. Between 2019 and 2021, the primary dropout rate declined from 7.8% to 7.1%, while the completion rate rose from 86.3% in 2017 to 90.7% in 2022. Notably, female students demonstrated significant progress, with their completion rate increasing from 87% to 91.3% compared to 85.5% to 90% for males. These positive trends suggest that the NSFP is contributing to improved access and completion of primary education in Rwanda.

3.4. Showcase of the Impact of School Meals on Education, Health, Nutrition, Local Economy: Case studies

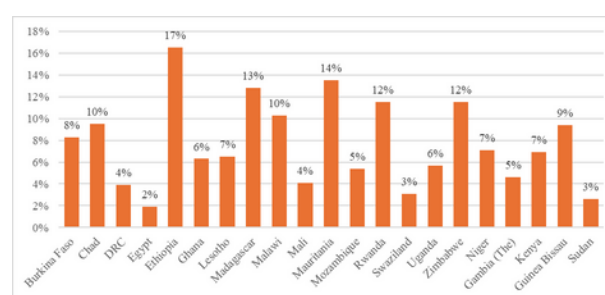
Nutrition plays a critical role in the health and development of children, particularly during their early years. These formative stages are crucial as they lay the foundation for physical growth, cognitive development, and overall well-being. Adequate nutrition not only supports healthy growth and weight but also significantly influences a child's immune system, helping to prevent illnesses.

Despite the critical importance of nutrition for early childhood development, malnutrition remains a significant challenge across Africa. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly half of African Member States experience high to very high rates of childhood stunting, with prevalence rates exceeding 30%. In stark contrast, only seven Member States report a low prevalence of stunting, defined as less than 19% (AU, 2021). Childhood stunting has severe repercussions, not only impairing the development of grey matter in young children but also negatively impacting their long-term cognitive abilities and economic productivity.

Undernutrition among children carries substantial national costs, significantly impacting a country's future productivity. When children experience malnutrition, their potential for growth and development is stunted, leading to diminished educational outcomes and reduced workforce capabilities. This, in turn, imposes higher healthcare costs as malnourished children are more susceptible to illness and require more medical attention.

The African Union (AU) has estimated that the economic cost of undernutrition varies widely across the continent, ranging from 2% of GDP in Egypt to a staggering 17% of GDP in Ethiopia. This means that, for instance, Ethiopia has effectively lost 17% of its GDP due to undernutrition among children. Such figures underscore the urgent need for comprehensive nutrition programs and policies.

Figure 8: Cost of undernutrition in 21 African countries



Source: AU, 2021

An analysis of the costs associated with undernutrition by its components (productivity, education and health) reveals that productivity losses are the most significant component across all countries studied (Table 1). Among these losses, mortality linked to undernutrition has the most profound impact. In fact, productivity losses due to undernutrition account for over 60% of the total cost, with figures ranging from 59% in Sudan to an alarming 97% in Ethiopia. These findings highlight the urgent need for preventive interventions aimed at reducing the number of undernourished children and alleviating future societal costs.

In this context, school meal programs play a vital role in providing essential nutrients for children, helping to prevent undernutrition. For instance, studies in Kenya have shown a significant reduction in anemia among children aged 2 to 14

who participated in school feeding programs for at least a year. This effect was particularly notable among adolescent girls, who are often more vulnerable to iron deficiencies (Neervoort et al., 2013; Adelman et al., 2019). These findings suggest that countries can significantly reduce costs associated with undernutrition by effectively implementing nutrition-sensitive school feeding programs (SFPs). Moreover, integrating dietary standards and guidelines for food procurement into these programs is crucial for promoting optimal nutrition.

Integrating dietary standards and guidelines for food procurement into school meal programs is essential for promoting optimal nutrition among children. Research indicates a positive correlation between the diversity of foods offered in school meals and the existence of a national policy governing school meal programs (World Vision, 2024). This approach fosters healthier eating habits, supports cognitive development, and enhances overall well-being, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes.



Table 1: Cost of undernourished children by component (%)

Country	Productivity	Education	Health
Burkina Faso	86%	0%	14%
Chad	69%	2%	29%
DRC	83%	4%	13%
Egypt	93%	1%	6%
Ethiopia	97%	0%	3%
Ghana	92%	0%	8%
Lesotho	92%	6%	2%
Madagascar	88%	1%	11%
Malawi	90%	2%	8%
Mali	92%	4%	4%
Mauritania	99%	0%	1%
Mozambique	86%	3%	12%
Rwanda	87%	0%	13%
Swaziland	92%	1%	8%
Uganda	71%	1%	28%
Zimbabwe	95%	1%	4%
Niger	89%	0%	11%
Gambia (The)	92%	0%	8%
Kenya	94%	1%	5%
Guinea Bissau	74%	1%	25%
Sudan	59%	1%	40%

Box 6: Case Study (13)

Nigeria: Nutrition Sensitive School Meal Program

The Nigerian government launched the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) in 2016 to address poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition while stimulating local economies. The program has expanded significantly, reaching 9.9 million children in 2022 from 1.05 million in 2017.

The NHGSFP prioritizes nutritious meals by emphasizing the consumption of at least four out of seven essential food groups daily. The "School Menu Planner PLUS" ensures the inclusion of locally available, culturally appropriate, and climate-smart foods, promoting dietary diversity and meeting the nutritional needs of growing children. Beyond addressing hunger, the program fosters economic growth by creating jobs across the food supply chain and providing stable markets for local farmers. This approach strengthens community resilience and supports sustainable development.

Source: Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, 2024.

3.6. Conclusion and the way forward

This chapter includes a synthesis review of available information and case studies regarding the impact of school meals program and complementary school-based initiatives.

An increasing number of African countries are integrating diverse policies into their school meal programs, including nutrition, health, food safety, smallholder farmers, agricultural, and climate/environmental policies. This multi-sectoral approach underscores the recognition of school meals as a platform for addressing broader development goals.

Furthermore, many countries are implementing complementary school-based programs such as handwashing, weight and height measurements, deworming, and anemia testing. Concurrent efforts include integrating complementary topics like food nutrition, agriculture, environment, hygiene, health, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention, physical education, and mental health into school curriculums. This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of a coordinated effort across sectors to maximize the impact of school feeding programs.

In 2024, close to 70 million children across Africa benefited from school meal programs, with over 72% of funding sourced domestically. Evidence suggests that these programs positively impacted education outcomes, including increased primary completion and survival rates. Case studies demonstrate higher enrollment and survival rates, reduced dropout and repetition rates, and improved health outcomes among program beneficiaries. Additionally, school meal programs stimulate local economies by creating markets for local produce and generating employment opportunities.

The following lessons were drawn to serve as additional guidance for improving the resilience and sustainability of school meal programs in Africa.

Enhancing Nutritional Sensitivity in School Meals Programs: School feeding programs serve as powerful instruments for addressing various interconnected challenges. The Nigerian HGSF Program (NHGSFP) exemplifies this by targeting several issues including combating poverty, alleviating food insecurity, and reducing malnutrition, all while stimulating local economies and fostering sustainable development.

Local Food Systems: Integrating local food systems, as seen in the Ethiopian HGSFP, the Nigerian NHGSFP, and the "Nourrir la ville" initiative in Burkina Faso, strengthens local economies, supports smallholder farmers, and ensures the provision of culturally appropriate and nutritious meals.

Multi-sectoral Collaboration: Effective collaboration between government agencies, international organizations, and local communities, as demonstrated in various case studies, is essential for achieving sustainable and impactful results.

Integrating Local Procurement with Strong Support Systems: The Ghana SFP illustrates that while local procurement can enhance community engagement and support smallholder farmers, its effectiveness relies on timely financial disbursements, robust market information, and strong government support. Addressing these elements is crucial to maximizing the program's benefits for both farmers and children, ultimately improving nutrition and educational outcomes.

Holistic Interventions are Key to Overcoming Barriers: The BBGE program demonstrates that addressing multiple barriers to girls' education—such as early marriage and unplanned pregnancies—requires a comprehensive approach. By integrating school meals, health training, and income-generating activities for parents, the program significantly improved enrollment and attendance rates. Prioritizing resource allocation towards in-depth interventions in fewer schools can maximize impact, highlighting the effectiveness of targeted, multifaceted strategies in promoting girls' education.

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4. CELEBRATING STRATEGIC COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR SCHOOL MEALS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

School meals play a transformative role in fostering educational success, improving child nutrition, and strengthening local economies. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of these programs hinge on strong partnerships and collaborative efforts among governments, development partners, civil society, private sector stakeholders, and local communities. Across Africa, the collective commitment of these actors has led to the expansion of school feeding initiatives, ensuring that millions of children receive nutritious meals daily while supporting smallholder farmers and local food systems.

This chapter highlights the strategic collaborations that have shaped school meal programs into a powerful tool for human capital development. It explores how multi-stakeholder engagement, through policy alignment, resource mobilization, and innovative program models has enhanced the reach and impact of school feeding initiatives. The chapter also sheds light on how regional and global alliances, such as the African Union's Home-Grown School Feeding Cluster and partnerships with international organizations, are reinforcing the link between education, nutrition, and economic growth.

As we celebrate these achievements, this chapter also calls for continued investment in strategic partnerships to scale up school feeding programs and ensure that every child has access to nutritious meals, quality education, and the opportunity to reach their full potential.

4.2. GOVERNMENT AND POLICY LEVEL PARTNERSHIPS

Strong government and policy-level partnerships are fundamental to the success and sustainability of school feeding programs across Africa. These partnerships ensure that school meals are not only prioritized within national development agendas but also integrated into broader policy frameworks on education, health, agriculture, and social protection. Governments play a critical role in driving policy formulation, resource mobilization, and program implementation, aligning school feeding initiatives with national strategies and international commitments such as the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25), Agenda 2063, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This section explores how governments collaborate with regional bodies, international organizations, and private sector partners to institutionalize Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) models, strengthen policy coordination, and enhance the impact of school meal programs. By examining successful case studies, we highlight the importance of high-level political commitment, multisectoral coordination, and long-term investment in ensuring that every child has access to nutritious meals, ultimately fostering improved learning outcomes, food security, and economic growth.

At the Member States Level:

Benin: Announced a target to expand coverage from 75% to 100% of the country's public schools, while providing all schools with appropriate infrastructure for kitchens, water access, and developing up to 100% local purchasing of food, support small farmers.

Kenya: Planned to expand its school meals program, today offered in arid and semi-arid areas of the country, to reach 10 million school children by 2030 with a universal school meals program, while introducing clean cooking technologies for nutritious hot meals.

Nigeria: Launched its Renewed Hope National Home Grown School Feeding Programme, feeding 20 million children annually; launched school farms that contribute 10% of food items to school feeding, engage 250,000 small holder farmers and aggregators in school feeding, and improve school attendance and reduce out of school children by 30% by 2026 and will deepen engagement with the private sector and explore innovative funding models to cover 30% of total programme costs by December 2026.

Sierra Leone: Aims to expand coverage from 54% of students to universal coverage by 2030, while ensuring the provision of locally produced and processed nutritious and healthy school meals to all pupils enrolled in pre-primary and basic and junior secondary education. At the same time, Sierra Leone seeks extra support and funding to address limitations such as school network reach, enrolment and transportation to reach children in poverty in rural areas and increase the nutritional value of the school meals provided to pupils.

Burundi[1]: Identified school meals as the largest social safety net for vulnerable children in the country. The government is committed to achieving universal access to education and is seeking to reach 2.8 million school-age children across the country by 2032. This commitment is reflected in the government's financial contribution which in 2023 increased from USD 2.2 million to USD 4.2 million per school year.

South Africa: Through the National School Nutrition Program (NSNP), South Africa aims to enhance the learning capacity of learners through the provision of a healthy meal at schools. Where it is implemented, the programme has shown to improve punctuality, regular school attendance, concentration and the general wellbeing of participating learners. The NSNP involves a large financial commitment from government (R5.3 billion) and reaches over 9 million learners.

The Government encourages schools to establish food gardens from which they obtain fresh produce (vegetables/fruit) to supplement the menu in line with South African Food Based Dietary Guidelines. Learners, teachers & parents are provided with skills to grow their own food contributing towards long-term household food security. Gardens are also used as a teaching and learning resource to beautify the environment.

Tunisia: School meals activities began in Tunisia in 1956, and the National School Meals Program was mandated by education reform legislation in 2002. The National School Meals Program operates in public schools. The WFP provides policy advice and technical assistance to national institutions implementing school meals and social protection programs. The WFP aims to work with the national government to strengthen regulatory frameworks and tools, provide technical assistance to refine the current decentralized school meals model, and facilitate testing of innovative delivery modalities.

[1]

<https://schoolmealscoalition.org/nourishing-burundis-future#:~:text=The%20Government%20of%20Burundi%20has,meals%20programme%20in%20the%20country>

At the international Level:

Finland: Strongly supports the School Meals Programmes through supporting WFP as the School Meals Coalition Secretariat and through supporting school meals programmes in selected countries. Finland's Minister for Foreign Trade and Development serves as a School Meals Coalition Champion and co-chair, advocating for school meals globally. Finland remains committed to advancing the Coalition's objectives by co-leading the Coalition's taskforce and coordinating strategic activities. The government pledges to adopt school meals procurement criteria that prioritize environmentally friendly cultivation, food safety, nutrition, animal welfare, and pupil involvement in planning and assessment. Finland offers technical expertise for countries developing school meals programmes and facilitating support through a dedicated website.

France: Through its French Food Assistance Programme and humanitarian aid, France dedicates at least 15% of funding to school meals programs and will continue to work with WFP to develop partnerships aimed at scaling up such programs. France will host the Nutrition4Growth summit in Paris on 27–28 March 2025 and is committed to encouraging strong political and financial support from state and non-state actors on nutrition and will advocate for ambitious pledges including commitments prioritizing nutrition-sensitive school meals programs.

Germany: Through its Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany has been instrumental in supporting school feeding programs in various countries. For instance, in Sierra Leone, Germany has provided EUR 10 million to WFP to offer nutritious meals to 25,300 primary school children in Karene district. This funding will enable WFP to provide safe and diverse meals using locally produced foods sourced by 8,000

smallholders. The initiative not only aims to improve children's nutrition and educational outcomes but also seeks to boost local food production and stimulate the local economy by creating a structured market for local farmers.

Norway: As a staunch supporter of school meals as a means for economic and social development, Norway will invest considerably in school meals programs through a variety of channels. Norway will cooperate with partner countries through The World Food Program, UN organizations, International Financial Institutions, NGOs and directly through bilateral programs to ensure healthy, nutritious school meals. Norway champions school meals as a platform to provide multiple benefits to school children, especially girls, and to improve the economic well-being of local actors, including smallholder farmers and solidify sustainable food systems.

4.3. COLLABORATION WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

International organizations also play a pivotal role in supporting and enhancing school feeding programs across Africa by providing technical expertise, financial resources, policy guidance, and advocacy. These partnerships complement national efforts, helping to scale up school meal initiatives, improve program efficiency, and integrate best practices from global experiences. Organizations such as the WFP, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) work closely with governments to strengthen school feeding policies, enhance monitoring and evaluation systems, and facilitate knowledge-sharing across countries.

This section presents the significance of these collaborations, showcasing how international partnerships contribute to the sustainability and expansion of School Meals programs. By leveraging technical assistance, capacity-building initiatives, and financial investments, international organizations help bridge resource gaps, promote innovative approaches, and ensure that school meals remain a key strategy for addressing education, nutrition, and social protection challenges in Africa.

World Food Program: As the world's leading agency supporting governments on school meals, WFP plans to reach 27 million of the most vulnerable children with nutritious meals in over 80 countries in 2025. As the School Meals Coalition Secretariat, WFP support the over 100 member governments of the Coalition to foster more sustainable and inclusive growth through school meals. This includes technical assistance to countries to reach the goal of providing 150 million more children with a daily meal in school by 2030. In addition, WFP, as the Secretariat of the Coalition, coordinate school meal-specific support across the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty's three pillars (national, financial, and knowledge) with support from its Support Mechanism.

The WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger^[1]: Brazil is a global hub for South-South public policy dialogue, learning, capacity building and technical assistance to promote action against hunger. The WFP Centre of Excellence is the result of a partnership that has existed since 2011 between WFP and the Brazilian government. The office supports governments in Africa,

Asia and Latin America in developing sustainable solutions to achieve zero hunger, programmes and public policies that are managed by national governments. The WFP Centre of Excellence's main objective is to bring together countries that face similar challenges in the areas of food and nutrition security, with a special focus on local purchases for school feeding programmes linked to family farming and nutrition. Both remotely and in person, WFP continues to strengthen government capacities in more than 15 countries to change people's lives and eradicate hunger.

Angola: In December 2023, Angola representatives participated in technical activities and field visits to learn about the Brazilian experience in the management of the National School Feeding Programme, especially in the areas of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and purchase mechanisms for smallholder agriculture.

Republic of Congo: In 2023, the Republic of the Congo launched a project to support the development of locally sourced school meals. This initiative focused on strengthening the institutional capacity of decision-makers at both central and local levels. A "training trainers" approach was implemented, supplemented by on-the-job guidance. Key stakeholders in this project included the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries and the Ministry of Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education, and Literacy. A delegation from Congo visited Brazil to see up close the implementation of the Brazilian law that requires purchasing from local smallholder farmers for the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), the connection between the programme and rural development initiatives, and details on how schools plan their weekly menus and how students are involved in nutrition and health education activities.

[1]

<https://centrodeexcelencia.org.br/en/sobre/>

Togo: Representatives from governments and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) offices in Brazil and Togo had a virtual meeting on November 14th to mark nearly 10 years of partnership on school meals and plan the next stage of this cooperation. During the meeting, the participants discussed the progress made in recent years and challenges for the new scale-up stage of the African country's school feeding programme. Togo highlighted that they were preparing to expand the provision of school meals by 35% by 2025, reaching 300 thousand beneficiaries.

Portuguese speaking African countries: In 2023, a team from the Centre participated in the II Seminar of Good Practices on School Feeding in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) in Luanda, Angola, which had as its theme "Home-grown school meals: a crucial strategy to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals". During the two event days, representatives from Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, Timor-Leste, the WFP Centre of Excellence, the WFP Country Office in Angola, private sector and civil society participated, in person and remotely, in debates and round tables on different aspects of school feeding programmes.

The UN World Food Programme's Regional Centre of Excellence against Hunger and Malnutrition (CERFAM): CERFAM is a regional hub for exchanges, partnership building and South-South Cooperation. CERFAM is the result of a partnership between the Government of Côte d'Ivoire and the World Food Programme (WFP) to support African countries in their national efforts to develop and implement

sustainable policies and programmes to achieve Zero Hunger (SDG2) and combat all forms of malnutrition in line with the 2030 Agenda. CERFAM contributed to the Landscape Analysis^[1], prepared in May 2024 by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), ECOWAS and the School Meals Coalition, and the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition, provides a comparative analysis across six domains, offering insights into the evolving dynamics, challenges, and best practices within the realm of HGSE. It serves also as a comprehensive resource for navigating the complexities and opportunities inherent in HGSE implementation across ECOWAS countries.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): FAO considers School Meals programmes as a game changer towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems for healthy diets and will expand support in this area according to country requests and budget availability. FAO will expand the scope and coverage of its school food global hub and enhance its potential for fostering exchange of experiences in areas relevant to school food and nutrition. The organization will consolidate its partnership with WFP and participate in global funding initiatives to support more governments in developing holistic nutrition guidelines and standards for enhancing the nutrition impact of school meal programmes. FAO will also carry out joint fundraising with UNICEF to support more countries in integrating action-oriented and effective food and nutrition education into their school systems.

[1]

https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/home-grown-school-feeding-west-africa-landscape-analysis_en

FAO will also continue to promote its comprehensive framework on School Food and Nutrition at global and at country level. FAO will continue its support to countries for enhancing the nutrition impact of school meal programmes in a holistic manner as well as linking them with sustainable public food procurement, to support local and smallholder farmers through home-grown school feeding approaches.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE): GPE is working with the World Food Programme and the School Meals Coalition, launched the School Health and Nutrition Technical Assistance Facility to provide technical assistance to countries to implement increasingly sustainable, gender-responsive and nationally owned school meal programmes so that schoolchildren can have safe, diverse, nutritious foods that are locally purchased. GPE commits an initial amount of \$3 million to this Facility with potential to scale the pilot as part of collaborative efforts under the School Meals Coalition

4.4. SCHOOL MEALS COALITION IN AFRICA

The School Meals Coalition, launched by 46 countries under the leadership of Finland and France at the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021, has since grown significantly both in membership and impact. The Coalition has adopted a non-hierarchical, inclusive structure that encourages active participation from governments. It recognizes that nearly all governments implement school meal programmes in some form and create an environment where each country can learn from one another. It now includes over 100 countries worldwide, including 43 African governments, the African Union (AU), the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC). The Coalition's overarching goal remains to ensure that all children have access to a daily, nutritious meal in school by 2030.

The Coalition's four initiatives—the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition (RCSHN), the Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition (SFI), the Data and Monitoring Initiative, and the Cities Feeding the Future Initiative—have, as of this writing, supported 25 African countries in strengthening their school meal programs through evidence-based research, financing strategies, monitoring tools, and peer-to-peer learning.

i.) Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition: The RCSHN was established at the request of the 100+ member states to provide policymakers with access to quality evidence and policy guidance on the most effective approaches to school-based health and nutrition programmes. The objectives of the Research Consortium are:

- Providing evidence on the effectiveness of school feeding programmes for learning, social and physical outcomes of children and youth across the world to make the case for investment in school-based health and nutrition programmes
- Providing policymakers and parliamentarians with programmatic guidance on the optimal policies to be implemented with regard to health, nutrition, and education.

The Research Consortium currently operates through global thematic Communities of Practice (COPs) which

engage extensively in accompanying African SMC member countries. The good examples COP is undertaking national case studies, documenting best practices and learning from country experience, in 16 AU countries, and has completed studies in Senegal, Togo and Benin, which are available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The Nutrition COP is engaging with the African Nutrition Society (ANS) and the Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS) to support the development of key nutrition indicators and to build a network of expert nutritionists on school-aged children across Africa. The Analytics & Metrics COP has conducted Value for Money Studies with the governments of Burundi, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. The Food Systems COP is actively working to evaluate different pathways for school meals to transform food systems, helping Rwanda, Kenya and Senegal to improve and expand their school meals programmes. The Planet-Friendly Diets COP drives innovation in school meals for improving planetary health; working with Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda to co-create policy-relevant research collaborations based on the white paper. This COP is leading to the creation of a 'toolbox of tools including diet assessment tools, clean cooking modelling tools, School Meal Planner PLUS and Agrobiodiversity Index, to help SMC member countries to integrate planet-friendly menus, reduce food waste, optimise clean and energy efficient cooking as well as engage in meaningful food education.

As a network of networks, the Research Consortium relies on a Global Academy of over 1,000 experts in School Health and Nutrition in over 104 countries, spread across some 330 organisations globally. For the African continent, this Global Academy

leverages on the active engagement of structures like the African Nutrition Society and the Federation of African Nutrition Societies to catalyse the work of SMC member countries in the domain of nutrition.

ii.) Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition (SFI):

The mission of SFI, led by the Education Development Center, is to collaborate with governments and donors to help countries identify multi-year financing opportunities for school meal programmes, with a particular focus on low- and lower-middle-income countries. In Africa, the SFI partners with the governments of Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and other key stakeholders, to conduct fiscal space analyses, assess the cost of school meals programmes, and support the development of sustainable financing strategies tailored to country contexts. In addition, the SFI is undertaking scoping work in Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritania and Zambia to explore similar support. In 2025, the SFI plans to deepen its engagement in Africa by facilitating national policy dialogues and discussions on sustainable school meals financing in partnership with governments and in-country partners. The initiative also collaborates with regional organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to advance the goal of increasing funding allocated to school meals programmes.

iii.) Cities Feeding the Future Initiative: The initiative is led by the Milan Urban Policy Pact. The Coalition is also empowering local governments in Africa to improve school meals by strengthening collaboration between local and national governments. As cities play a central role in implementing school meal programmes, this initiative allows for more innovative and contextually relevant solutions to emerge, particularly in urban areas where the challenges of reaching vulnerable children are often more complex. The initiative has also gathered cities in Africa on the occasion of the 6th MUFPP Regional Forum in Addis Ababa, bringing together 50 attendees from 14 African cities discussing the key lever that school meals programmes represent for local governments.

iv.) Data and Monitoring Initiative (DMI): DMI is a global school meals database which will track and monitor Coalition actions and accomplishments. It serves as the key monitoring and reporting initiative for the three objectives of the School Meals Coalition. DMI is a demand-driven initiative of national governments that was established with the goal of improving and institutionalizing the availability of quality data on national school meal programmes worldwide for evidence-based decision-making and tracking of progress over time. It helps various stakeholders to share and exchange information, identify knowledge gaps for research, identify best practices, guide policies, track progress and improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of the programmes.

In the last two years, the School Meals Coalition has turned the global momentum into a regionally led movement, advancing its core mission of driving concrete action at the country level.

By fostering stronger regional collaboration, the Coalition enabled countries to access tailored support, strengthen national commitments, and unlock new opportunities for impactful partnerships that directly addressed the needs of governments and their communities. The AU, ECOWAS, and SADC are among the key regional players driving the Coalition's agenda forward on the continent. Rwanda launched the East Africa Regional School Meals Network in 2023.

4.5. International Finance Institutions and Foundations

International Finance Institutions (IFIs) and foundations play a crucial role in supporting and expanding school meal programs globally. Their involvement is essential not only for providing necessary financing but also for facilitating the scaling-up of these programs to reach more children. IFIs, such as the World Bank, regional development banks, and other multilateral institutions, offer significant financial resources through loans, grants, and technical assistance, enabling governments to invest in infrastructure, procurement, and logistical support for school meal programs. Beyond direct funding, IFIs contribute expertise in program design, implementation, and monitoring, helping countries develop sustainable and efficient school meal systems. Their involvement often brings credibility and encourages other donors and partners to invest, further leveraging resources and expanding the reach and impact of these vital programs. By working with governments and other stakeholders, IFIs help to strengthen national capacities and create an enabling environment for the long-term success of school meal initiatives.

The World Bank Group (WB): The WB commits to scaling up social protection programs, working alongside partners to support at least 500 million people in developing countries by 2030— aiming for half of those to be women and girls, including through its International Development Association (IDA). School meals programmes are an integral part of social protection supporting families and ensuring that children can learn without being hungry.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IADB): IADB will provides – subject to the approval of its board an estimated USD 25 billion from 2025 to 2030 to support country-owned, country-led implementation of policies and programmes included in the Global Alliance’s reference basket, including school meals programmes, to accelerate progress against poverty and hunger and the achievement of SDGs. The IADB also commits that 50% of IADB newly approved projects will directly benefit the poor, especially women, people of African descent, and indigenous peoples – those most affected by poverty. Also, 60% of newly approved projects by the IADB Lab will directly benefit poor and vulnerable populations. The IADB will serve as a key financing hand to the alliance through the reallocation of SDR to Multilateral Development Banks. It is collaborating with AfDB in seeking country contributors for the Special Drawing Rights (SDR)denominated hybrid capital financing mechanism that would increase available financing for countries to implement policies from the Global Alliance reference basket. For every \$1 billion equivalent of SDR channelled through the IADB, the IADB will generate approximately \$7 billion in additional financing. This could result in an additional 10 million children receiving school meals.

The Rockefeller and Novo Nordisk Foundations: The foundations are working with a consortium of partners to co-develop an initiative to expand healthy, home, and regeneratively grown school meals to 100 million more children in a planet-friendly and financially sustainable way by 2030. This year the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), in partnership with the African Development Bank (AfDB), formalized their commitment to establish the End School-Age Hunger Fund (ESAH Fund) by signing a Letter of Intent. CIFF has pledged an initial \$50 million to the fund, which aims to provide critical support to African countries dedicated to achieving universal school feeding programs. The ESAH Fund plans to offer a combination of grants and loans to build and expand sustainable school feeding initiatives across the continent.

4.6. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) are vital partners in school meal programs, contributing significantly to both program delivery and capacity building. They often work directly with communities to provide meals to vulnerable children, particularly in hard-to-reach areas or during emergencies. Beyond direct service provision, NGOs and CSOs play a key role in strengthening government capacity by offering technical expertise, training, and logistical support. They can also act as advocates, raising awareness about the importance of school meals and mobilizing community support for these initiatives. By working closely with local stakeholders, NGOs and CSOs help ensure that school meal programs are tailored to specific needs and are implemented effectively and sustainably.

Mary's Meals: Mary's Meals is a global hunger charity dedicated to providing daily meals in school settings and aims to address two critical issues simultaneously: hunger and education. By offering food at school, Mary's Meals encourages children to attend classes, thereby enhancing their educational opportunities while ensuring they receive the nourishment they need. Mary's Meals operates in several African countries, including Malawi, Liberia, Kenya, Zambia, and South Sudan with underlying mission to provide one meal every school day. They also invest in climate-resilient agricultural practices and infrastructure projects, ensuring a stable food supply for its programs.

World Vision[1]: World Vision's holistic approach to School Meals is a proven success, which integrates Education, Nutrition, Health, WASH, Livelihoods, Gender, PSEA, and Child Protection to support vulnerable children. World Vision collaborates with governments and partners including the World Food Programme (WFP), McGovern-Dole Food for Education, and Education Cannot Wait to ensure the successful delivery of school meals to the most vulnerable children, supporting them and their communities. As a key partner in the School Meals Coalition, World Vision are actively shaping the global agenda for school meals programming, focusing on building strong safety nets for vulnerable children across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. World Vision works with national governments and local communities providing technical support and advocating for sustainable school meals.

Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition: Gain works with schools to provide fortified school meals and supports the development of home-grown school feeding programs that source food locally from smallholder farmers and gardens. They also support the development of school meals programs guidelines.

4.7. Communities

The active participation of parents and communities is essential for the effective implementation, long-term sustainability, and ultimate success of school meal programs. Their involvement goes beyond simply addressing immediate nutritional needs; it cultivates a supportive environment that fosters children's educational and personal development. Communities play a vital role in various aspects of these programs, from contributing to food preparation and distribution to monitoring program effectiveness and advocating for its continued support. This sense of ownership strengthens community engagement, ensures cultural appropriateness, and promotes the program's integration into the local context, leading to greater impact and long-term viability.



[1] <https://www.wvi.org/disaster-management/school-meals>

- **Advocacy:** Parents and communities actively advocate for sustained funding and support for school feeding programs at local and national levels.
- **Active Participation:** Volunteers contribute significantly to program success by assisting with meal preparation, serving, and fundraising activities and Parental involvement enhances the efficiency and reach of these programs.
- **Nutrition Education:** Parents and communities play a crucial role in educating children about the importance of nutrition and healthy eating habits, complementing the objectives of school meal programs.
- **Local Food Systems:** School meals programs often source ingredients locally, supporting local farmers and economies and Parents and communities participate in food production and collaborate with local producers to ensure a steady supply of fresh, high-quality ingredients.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Parents and communities provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness and impact of school feeding programs, enabling ongoing refinement and improvement to better meet students' needs.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** By involving parents and community members, programs ensure that meals are not only nutritious but also culturally appropriate and acceptable to students.
- **Resource Mobilization:** Communities contribute financially or through in-kind donations, alleviating the financial burden on schools and governments.
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Active community involvement ensures that school feeding programs are managed transparently and are held accountable for their outcomes, fostering trust and long-term success.

4.8. Private Sector Partnerships and Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an essential aspect of business operations in Africa. Companies are recognizing the importance of contributing to the communities in which they operate. Some of the private sector actors participating in the school meals program are:

- **Nestlé:** Nestlé is a global food and beverage leader, has been a significant contributing to school feeding programs in Africa. Through its Nestlé for Healthier Kids initiative, the company collaborates with various governments and non-governmental organizations to provide nutritious meals to school children. Their programs aim to combat malnutrition and foster better health among students, ensuring they have the energy to succeed academically.
- **Unilever:** Unilever is another global consumer goods giant, playing a crucial role in promoting school feeding initiatives as part of its CSR efforts in Africa. The company has partnered with organizations such as the World Food Programme to deliver nutritious meals to schools in several African countries. Unilever's commitment to sustainable living is reflected in its efforts to improve food security and support educational infrastructure.
- **PepsiCo:** PepsiCo has made notable contributions to school feeding initiatives through its Food for Good program. This CSR initiative focuses on providing access to nutritious meals for children in underserved communities. By partnering with local governments and organizations, PepsiCo aims to alleviate hunger and improve health outcomes for school-aged children.

- **DSM-Firmenich:** The company actively contributes to enhancing global school meal programs by focusing on fortification to combat hidden hunger. At the 22nd Global Child Nutrition Forum, the company hosted workshops emphasizing the importance of enriching school meals with essential micronutrients to support children's development. By providing science-backed, affordable, and accessible nutritional solutions, DSM-Firmenich collaborates with partners to implement effective school feeding programs worldwide. These initiatives aim to ensure that children receive the necessary nutrients to thrive physically and cognitively, thereby improving educational outcomes and long-term health.
- **Anheuser-Busch InBev:** Is a leading global brewer, also contributes to school feeding initiatives in Africa as part of its CSR strategy. The company partners with local organizations to implement programs that provide nutritious meals for children, aiming to improve their overall health and academic performance.
- **Coca-Cola:** Coca-Cola company has a long-standing history of supporting educational and nutritional programs in Africa. Through its partnership with the Global Environment & Technology Foundation, Coca-Cola has implemented various school feeding initiatives that provide healthy meals to students, contributing to their well-being and educational success.
- **KFC's South Africa and R2 Voluntary:** KFC South Africa and R2 voluntary jointly donated from their customers, feed more than 30 million nutritious meals to children throughout South Africa. This contributes to a brighter future for these children, as they will be able to focus once they have a full stomach which fuels them to learn, grow and thrive. For the past 15 years KFC has supplied 325 million meals through various non-profit organizations.
- **Tetra Pak Food for Development:** Tetra Pak Food for Development collaborates with customers, governments, development agencies, funding organizations, and NGOs worldwide to advance the dairy and food value chain. In line with a World Food Programme (WFP) policy paper supporting the use of UHT milk in school feeding programs, Tetra Pak participates in a school meals initiative providing enhanced nutrition to 20,000 children in central Burundi.

4.9. Challenges and Opportunities

While collaborative efforts in school meal programs have generated substantial positive outcomes, several key challenges persist that require careful attention and strategic solutions. These challenges, if unaddressed, can hinder progress and limit the potential impact of these vital programs.

- **Resource Constraints:** Funding remains a persistent challenge for many school meal programs. Shortfalls in financial resources can jeopardize the consistent delivery of meals, impacting program continuity and potentially leading to program closures. To mitigate this risk, diversifying funding sources is crucial. This can involve exploring a combination of government funding, private sector partnerships, philanthropic contributions, and community-based fundraising initiatives. Developing innovative financing mechanisms, such as social impact bonds or public-private partnerships, can also help secure long-term financial stability.
- **Coordination Issues:** Effective collaboration, while essential, can be complex. Successfully coordinating the efforts of multiple partners, including government agencies, NGOs, community organizations, and international bodies, requires clear communication channels, well-defined roles and responsibilities, and shared goals. Misalignments in priorities, differing operational procedures, and inadequate information sharing can lead to inefficiencies and hinder program effectiveness. Establishing robust communication networks, regular coordination meetings, and joint planning processes can help mitigate these challenges and foster a more cohesive and collaborative approach.
- **Scalability and Sustainability:** Scaling up successful school meal program models to reach wider regions and larger populations presents significant logistical and operational challenges. Expanding program coverage requires strategic planning, substantial investment in infrastructure (including kitchens, storage facilities, and transportation networks), and ongoing capacity building for staff and volunteers. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of scaled-up programs necessitates careful consideration of local contexts, including food availability, cultural preferences, and community ownership. Developing local supply chains, empowering communities to participate in program management, and integrating school meal programs into national education strategies are crucial for ensuring long-term viability.

4.9. Challenges and Opportunities

The success of school meal programs across Africa is fundamentally linked to the strength and depth of collaborative partnerships. These programs thrive when diverse stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, NGOs, community groups, and the private sector, work together towards shared goals. To further amplify the impact of these crucial partnerships, the following recommendations should be carefully considered and implemented:

- **Strengthening Multi-Sectoral Approaches:** School meal programs should not exist in isolation. Integrating them with initiatives in health, agriculture, and education creates holistic and sustainable programs with synergistic benefits. Linking school meals with local agricultural production can stimulate local economies, improve food security, and ensure the freshness and nutritional value of meals. Integrating health screenings and nutrition education within school meal programs can address health issues and promote healthy eating habits. Furthermore, aligning school meal programs with educational goals can enhance student attendance, concentration, and learning outcomes. This integrated approach maximizes the impact of investments and creates a more comprehensive support system for children.
- **Encourage Policy Advocacy:** Creating an enabling policy environment is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of school meal programs. Stakeholders should actively engage in policy advocacy to ensure that policymakers prioritize school meals within national agendas and allocate adequate resources. This includes advocating for supportive legislation, developing clear policy guidelines, and securing sustainable funding mechanisms. Promoting evidence-based research on the benefits of school meals can strengthen advocacy efforts and influence policy decisions. Building strong relationships with policymakers and engaging in constructive dialogue are crucial for creating a political climate conducive to expanding and improving school meal programs.

- **Leverage Technology and Innovation:** Modern technologies offer significant opportunities to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of school meal programs. Utilizing digital platforms for food distribution management can streamline logistics, reduce waste, and improve transparency. Mobile technology can be used for real-time program monitoring, data collection, and communication with stakeholders. Innovative food processing and preservation techniques can help extend the shelf life of food and ensure its nutritional quality. Exploring and adopting these technological advancements can significantly improve program implementation, reduce costs, and enhance the overall impact of school meals.
- **Promote Knowledge Sharing:** Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and best practices between successful school meal programs within Africa is crucial for replicating successful models and avoiding common pitfalls. Creating platforms for sharing experiences, lessons learned, and innovative approaches can accelerate progress and promote continuous improvement. Organizing workshops, conferences, and study tours can enable stakeholders to learn from each other and adapt successful strategies to their own contexts. Establishing online communities of practice can facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration among program implementers. By fostering a culture of knowledge sharing, Africa can leverage its collective experience to strengthen and expand school meal programs across the continent.

As we celebrate the significant contributions of partners to school meal programs in Africa, it is vital to acknowledge that the journey towards universal school feeding is ongoing. While progress has been made, significant challenges remain. Continued investment, sustained innovation, and coordinated action are essential to scale up programs, improve the nutritional quality of meals, and ensure that no child is left behind. By reinforcing existing partnerships, forging new collaborations, and leveraging shared resources, Africa can move closer to a future where every child has access to the nutritious food they need to thrive, both in school and beyond. This commitment to collaborative action is not just about providing meals; it's about investing in the future of Africa's children and building a foundation for a healthier, more prosperous continent.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the achievements and challenges faced in the implementation of school meals programs in Africa during the 2023–2024 period. Drawing on official data from various countries, as well as insights from other relevant publications and selected case studies, the report is structured into four chapters. It highlights significant progress in the development of school meals programs, focusing on emerging trends, notable achievements, and innovative practices. Furthermore, the report presents compelling evidence on the multifaceted impact of school meals and complementary school-based initiatives on education, health, nutrition, social

protection, and local economies. By leveraging existing data and showcasing successful case studies, the report illustrates how these programs contribute to the well-being of children and communities.

In addition to outlining achievements, the report emphasizes the critical role of strategic collaboration and partnerships in advancing school meals programs throughout the continent. It explores the involvement of various stakeholders—including governments, development partners, IFIs, Foundations, NGOs, CSOs and the private sector—in transforming these initiatives into reality. The report also addresses the challenges and barriers that hinder the effective implementation of school meals programs, while identifying potential opportunities for future growth and improvement. By highlighting both the successes and the obstacles encountered, this report aims to provide a roadmap for enhancing the effectiveness of school meals programs in Africa, ultimately contributing to better educational and health outcomes for children across the region.

Findings of the study indicate a strong commitment to SMPs across Africa, with 91% of countries having established national policies by 2024. The adoption of HGSPF initiatives is also on the rise, with over 40 nations actively implementing these programs. Funding for SMPs has increased significantly, from \$1.32 billion in 2020 to \$1.96 billion in 2024, with 83% the program financed domestically, reflecting a growing prioritization of child nutrition. Notably, the number of children benefiting from these programs has surged to approximately 87 million in 2024, a 32% increase from the figure in 2022 (65.9 million). In 2024, the school meal program coverage rate in Africa stands at 39%.

However, there is a significant disparity between high- and low-income countries with upper middle-income countries boasting a coverage rate of 79%, while low-income countries lag with only 27%. Additionally, there is a marked shift towards integrating complementary health and nutrition interventions, with all African countries now implementing at least one such program with SMP, highlighting a holistic approach to child development and education.

Evidence from various case studies indicates that children benefiting from SMPs experience higher enrollment and survival rates, along with reduced dropout and repetition rates, and improved health outcomes. Integrating dietary standards and guidelines for food procurement into SMPs is crucial for promoting optimal nutrition among children. This has the potential to address malnutrition, which poses substantial economic costs in Africa—reaching up to 17% of GDP in Ethiopia alone.

In addition to providing education and health benefits for children, school meal programs (SMPs) have become vital for capacity building by fostering connections between schools and local communities. They offer training for kitchen staff and cooks, equipping them with essential skills to prepare healthy and balanced meals. Innovations in meal planning, efficient cooking methods, data management, and environmental considerations are increasingly integrated into SMPs. Case studies demonstrate the positive impact of these initiatives on both the environment and resource utilization.

Despite the notable progress achieved, school meal programs in Africa face significant challenges. Limited coverage and inadequate funding restrict access to nutritious meals, with many programs struggling due to insufficient government support and delayed parental payments, resulting in menus low in essential nutrients. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate storage and unreliable water supply, compromises food safety and increases waste. Political instability and conflict are severely disrupting school meals programs across Africa in countries like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Furthermore, ineffective coordination among ministries hinders success, while smallholder farmers face low production and limited market access, complicating supply. The lack of national standards for food services further undermines program effectiveness and local producer engagement.

The progress achieved in advancing SMP in Africa is the result of strong partnership and collaborations among key stakeholders including governments, international organizations, Foundations, IFIs, NGOs, the private sector, and local communities. These key actors helped in institutionalizing the SMP, strengthening policy coordination and enhancing its impact. Many African countries have shown strong political commitments and investment in expanding access to SMPs. The progress achieved in advancing SMP in Africa is the result of strong partnership and collaborations among key stakeholders including governments, international organizations, Foundations, IFIs, NGOs, the private sector, and local communities. These key actors helped in institutionalizing the SMP, strengthening policy coordination and enhancing its impact. Many African countries have shown strong political commitments and investment in expanding access to SMPs.

International organizations including WFP, UNICEF, FAO AUDA-NEPAD, CERFAM, and GPE played a pivotal role in supporting and enhancing SMPs across Africa by providing technical expertise, financial resources, policy guidance, and advocacy. With the aim of advancing SMP and create a platform for experience sharing, School Meals Coalition was established in 2021 under the leadership of Finland and France. The Coalition has more than 100 members in 2024. The Coalition has four initiatives—the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition (RCSHN), the Sustainable Financing Initiative for School Health and Nutrition (SFI), the Data and Monitoring Initiative (DMI), and the Cities Feeding the Future Initiative—have, as of this writing, supported 25 African countries in strengthening their school meal programs through evidence-based research, financing strategies, monitoring tools, and peer-to-peer learning.

IFIs and Foundations also played a crucial role in supporting and expanding school meal programs in Africa by providing essential financing and technical assistance. Their contributions empower governments to invest in the necessary infrastructure and logistics, ensuring that more children have access to nutritious meals. By enhancing program design and implementation, IFIs promote sustainable systems and attract additional investments, thereby amplifying the impact of school meal initiatives across the continent.

NGOs such as Mary's Meals, World Vision, and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, along with CSOs, have played crucial role in expanding SMP in Africa. Additionally, private sector played a crucial role, and their participation has become essential, with companies like Nestlé, Unilever, PepsiCo, DSM-Firmenich, Coca-Cola, Anheuser-Busch InBev, KFC South

and Tetra Pak actively contributing to SMP in Africa as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts. The involvement of parents and communities is equally important for the effective implementation, long-term sustainability, and overall success of school meal programs.

5.2. Recommendations

Securing a future where every African child is well-nourished and educated demands a concerted, transformative effort to fortify SMPs. A critical pivot lies in diversifying financial streams; pioneering funding models like public-private alliances and grassroots mobilization, alongside sustained pressure for elevated national budget allocations and rigorous fiscal accountability, is paramount. Simultaneously, strategic capital injections into robust infrastructure, streamlined food acquisition, and the empowerment of local agricultural producers are indispensable. Building a holistic framework necessitates the deployment of advanced data analytics, the integration of ecological stewardship, and the forging of seamless, cross-sectoral alliances spanning education, health, and agriculture. To truly embed these programs, constructing a conducive regulatory landscape and championing progressive legislation will be the cornerstones of enduring success and long-term viability. Thus, to improve School Meal Programs in Africa, this study recommends the following policy actions.

- To enhance SMPs and ensure that every child in Africa has access to nutritious food and quality education, governments and key stakeholders should pursue innovative financing mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and community fundraising, while advocating for increased domestic funding and maintaining financial transparency.
- Strategic investments in infrastructure—such as kitchen facilities and storage—are essential, along with efficient food procurement and access to clean water.
- Empowering smallholder farmers through training, establishing direct connections to schools, and ensuring transparent procurement processes is also vital.
- Implementing robust data collection and monitoring systems, integrating environmental sustainability and local food systems into school feeding programs, and enhancing the nutritional quality of these meals are crucial for addressing the interconnected challenges faced by SMPs.
- Developing standardized monitoring indicators and interactive dashboards will aid in tracking program impact. Integrating complementary health interventions with school meals and establishing robust contingency plans for emergencies will further ensure the programs' effectiveness and sustainability.
- Strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration—linking education, health, and agriculture—can create more comprehensive support systems for children. Additionally, building strong relationships with policymakers and advocating for supportive legislation are vital for prioritizing school meals within national agendas. By promoting knowledge sharing and leveraging technology, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of SMPs and ensure that every child has access to nutritious food and quality education, ultimately contributing to sustainable development across the continent.
- Creating an enabling policy environment is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of school meal programs. Stakeholders should actively engage in policy advocacy to ensure that policymakers prioritize school meals within national agendas and allocate adequate resources. This includes advocating for supportive legislation, developing clear policy guidelines, and securing sustainable funding mechanisms.



• List of Abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
ANS	African Nutrition Society
AU	Africa Union
AUC	Africa Union Commission
AUDA	African Union Development Agency
CERFAM	Regional Centre of Excellence Against Hunger and
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
CIFF	Children's Investment Fund Foundation
COP	Communities of Practice
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPLP	Community of Portuguese Language Countries
CRS	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DMI	Data and Monitoring Initiative
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EHAGL	East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes
ESAH	End School-Age Hunger Fund
ESTI	Africa Union Education, Science, Technology and
FANUS	The Federation of African Nutrition Societies

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCNF	Global Child Nutrition Forum
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GSFP	Ghana's School Feeding Program
HGSF	Home Grown School Feeding
HICs	High-income countries
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IFAD	International Fund for Agriculture Development
LMICS	Low- and middle-income countries
LPG	Liquefied Petroleum Gas
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NA	Northern Africa
NaSIS-	Namibia's School Meals Information Managemer
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PCD	Partnership for Child Development
RCSHN	Research Consortium for School Health and Nut
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SFI	Sustainable Financing Initiative
SMP	School Meals Program

SSA	sub-Saharan Africa
THR	Take home rations
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USD	United States Dollar
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO-	World Health Organization