

Task Force 01

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER

School Meals: A Unique Strategy for Fighting Inequality, Poverty, and Hunger and Achieving the SDGs

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Abstract

Children are the most vulnerable to the intersecting crises of poverty, hunger, poor health and education, and climate change. Hundreds of millions of children live in poverty and malnutrition; 240M of them are out of school, and 1B are at high risk from the climate crisis. School meal programs (SMPs) are a unique strategy for synergistically tackling these crises, addressing multiple SDGs with multi-sectoral co-benefits. Yet countries' fiscal challenges deprive 300M children and their communities of the benefits of SMPs.

Schools make education systems a powerful tool for food distribution at scale and fundamental change in attitudes towards food. SMPs, reaching 418M children, are pivotal for systemic change, improving attendance, nutrition and health, and contributing to societal equity and advancement. With 9:1 returns, they can also drive changes in food systems, enhancing agriculture, economy, biodiversity, resilience and food sovereignty. Integrated with food and environmental education, planet-friendly SMPs can instill sustainable food practices from a young age.

Building on Brazil's leadership, the African Union's engagement, and the School Meals Coalition's momentum, the G20 can be a champion for planet-friendly SMPs and synergize them with other initiatives in food and nutrition security, agri-food systems, education, and the environment. Recommendations for the G20 include (a) scaling up investment in SMPs as a key intervention of the Global Alliance Against Hunger; (b) establishing a catalytic platform to support LICs and LMICs in expanding and improving their SMPs and addressing challenges in financing, delivery model, menu optimization, advocacy, governance, and systemic leadership; (c) develop a school meals innovation network focused on advancing and disseminating novel approaches; (d) foster synergy between the G20 and G7 on SMPs support; and (e) promote cooperation among G20 countries for capacity-building initiatives supporting SMPs actors.

The Challenge - Diagnosis of the Issue

Children from low-income families are among the most vulnerable groups bearing the brunt of global and local shocks and crises. These crises exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new ones, significantly impacting vulnerable school-aged children worldwide.

In April 2020, amidst the peak of COVID-19-induced school closures, 370 million children lost access to school meals, their primary daily meal (WFP, 2022). Currently, approximately 66 million children in low-income countries (LICs) and over 100 million in lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) suffer from malnutrition, concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (SFI, 2023). Child poverty surged during the pandemic, with an estimated 333 million children living in extreme poverty, more than half of them school-aged (Salmeron-Gomez et al., 2023).

COVID-19 also exacerbated the global learning crisis, leading to an increase in the number of children unable to read or understand age-appropriate text. In LMICs, the proportion of ten-year-olds unable to read or comprehend age-appropriate text increased from 57 percent in 2019 to 70 percent in 2022 (World Bank et al., 2022). Additionally, UNESCO (2023) reported 250M children globally were out-of-school, while UNICEF (2023) highlighted the climate crisis's threat to 1B children in vulnerable countries.

Governments must ensure vulnerable children's well-being by dismantling structural barriers like poverty and hunger and guaranteeing access to quality education and human capital development. Multi-sectoral approaches are essential for achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) while addressing intersecting challenges like climate change and gender inequity.

SMPs are a versatile policy tool to mitigate crises and advance multiple SDGs, including SDG 1 and SDG 2, while generating co-benefits across others (SDGs 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17). Such multi-sectoral instruments can accelerate SDG implementation, addressing concerns raised by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (2023) about slow progress or regression below the 2015 baseline. An analysis by the London School of Economics found that 81 percent of SDG indicators are off track in LICs. Well-designed and financed SMPs are a powerful tool for widespread food distribution and catalyzing fundamental changes in food-related attitudes, behaviors, and practices. They enhance health and learning outcomes at scale, particularly benefiting marginalized children, including girls, by reducing gender disparities in education access and improving test scores, even during emergencies.

Evidence supports these claims. Across 32 countries, Gelli et al. (2007) found that schools providing onsite meals combined with take-home rations sustained girls' enrolment rates at 30 percent. Moreover, a systematic review and meta-analysis indicate that SMPs positively impacted children's weight gain (Wang et al., 2021). Brazil's 'Zero Hunger' strategy and India's *Poshan Abhiyaan* are compelling examples of SMPs supporting poverty and hunger eradication while also improving learning outcomes and reducing stunting across generations.

Despite the potential of SMPs, many countries in the Global South face similar challenges, resulting in low SMP coverage (Box 1). In East Asia and the Pacific, Sub Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, only 22, 26 and 33 percent of children, respectively, receive school meals (Figure 1) – well below the global average of 41 percent (WFP, 2022).



Box 1: Global Challenges in scaling up SMPs

Factors that impact on LICs and LMICs ability to scale up coverage include:

- **Fiscal Space:** Many LMICs face challenges in sustaining SMPs due to limited fiscal space and increasing debt service costs. External donors currently provide 55 percent of funding for SMPs in LICs (WFP, 2022).
- **Menu optimization and operating costs:** Currently, delivery models in many LMICs prioritize food procurement at the lowest cost, hindering broader objectives like local procurement, nutrition, gender equality, and climate resilience. The costs of school feeding vary across and within countries, depending on procurement and distribution systems' the efficiency, existing school infrastructure, and other factors. Emerging evidence indicates that the annual cost per school-aged child for reasonable quality meals ranges from US\$ 40-75 in LICs and LMICs.
- **Policy and institutional coordination:** Andrews et al. (2023) highlight fragmentation in food policy, with food systems often sidelined in discussions across sectors like agriculture, social protection, education, health, environment, welfare, and economy. Sectoral policies often conflict. SMPs offer an opportunity to align ministries and leverage programs for multiple objectives.
- **Political Commitment and Leadership:** Efforts to expand and retool SMPs have been driven by strong political leadership alongside systemic and cross-sectoral leadership to think differently about addressing existing bottlenecks.

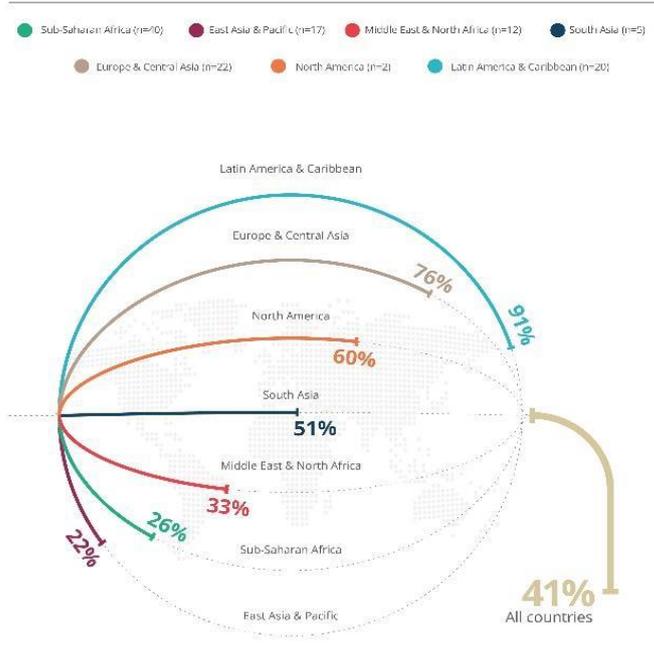


FIGURE 1. School Meals Coverage in 2022 by Region

Source: WFP, 2022.

The G20 Action Plan (2023) has recognized school meals as a potent catalyst for advancing the SDGs, particularly in reducing inequalities, fostering inclusion, ensuring food and nutrition security, and contributing to the SDGs through bilateral, South-South, and trilateral cooperation. This opportunity becomes particularly powerful under the Brazilian G20 Presidency’s efforts to launch the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty (GAAHP) to promote transformative policies to reduce hunger and poverty. SMPs stand out as one preeminent such instrument.

Recommendations

SMPs, reaching 418 million children across school levels, form one of the world's largest social safety nets (WFP, 2022). Despite this, only 41 percent of primary school children are covered. The School Meals Coalition (SMC), formed in response to the pandemic, aims to restore SMPs to pre-COVID-19 levels, enhance program quality, and strengthen global school meal systems. With 97 member states, three regional bodies, 124 partners, and four networked initiatives, the SMC strives to provide every child with a nutritious meal by 2030, emphasizing the importance of closing the coverage gap.

Scaling up SMP coverage goes beyond food and nutrition security for children, contributing to broader systemic change. SMPs create structured demand, influencing government decisions on food types, procurement sources, and production systems (Valencia et al., 2021). Governments also decide who prepares the meals and how (e.g., high-emission versus clean cooking). These policy decisions allow governments to simultaneously leverage the purchasing power of SMPs towards multidimensional policy goals (social, economic, and environmental). School feeding is one of the most effective interventions for increasing school enrolment and retention, as well as for promoting equality and inclusion in education (Bedasso, 2022). Especially when incorporating school gardens and educational components, SMPs can be leveraged as learning laboratories for current and future generations and communities to promote healthy and sustainable diets and lifestyles and ecological literacy (RCHSN 2023).

G20 member states have utilized SMPs to drive wider systemic change. South Korea strategically employs SMPs to serve as a “protected niche” to create demand-led shifts to promote the transition towards planet-friendly agri-food systems, with SMPs supporting the country’s eco-friendly or organic food market (Gaddis & Jeon, 2020; Son, 2023).

Similarly, SMPs in Brazil have been instrumental in driving demand for local agriculture, catalyzing agroecological transitions (RCHSN, 2023; Resque et al., 2019), and empowering women at the subnational level (Valencia et al., 2021). Both countries operate universal free school meals programmes, enhancing the potential of SMPs for systemic change (Cohen et al., 2023).

To support governments in the Global South in closing the coverage gap and maximizing the potential of SMPs, the G20 Brazil should commit to expanding healthy, home-grown school meals to at least an additional 100 million vulnerable children in a planet-friendly and financially sustainable manner by 2030. This fully aligns with Brazil's efforts to establish the GAAHP. The following recommendations outline steps for the G20 to lead towards this goal:

1. Facilitate partnerships between the SMC, the Brazil-led Task Force for the GAAHP, and other stakeholders to develop a roadmap for establishing a catalytic, country-driven platform supporting LMICs in expanding SMPs for 100 million additional children. This platform should help countries address capacity gaps in six critical areas:

- a. **Public Financing:** Develop strategies to expand fiscal space sustainably, aiming for universal school feeding; for instance, by leveraging capital from aid donors and MDBs — which collectively stands at \$280M annually; reprioritizing SMPs within national budgets; increasing school meals-specific financing through earmarked taxation; tapping into international capital markets through the issuance of green and SDG bonds by sovereigns; debt restructuring (debt-for-school meals swaps); and re-channelling of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) through international financial institutions.

- b. **Delivery model:** Assist countries in developing and implementing cost-effective SMP delivery models – integrating cross-sectoral approaches – tailored to their context.

c. Menu optimization: Optimize menus for healthier diets, local economic development, climate-smart practices, and resilience with limited resources.

d. Advocacy: Support school meals advocacy to persuade national governments and line ministries on the benefits of school meals, unlocking investment and supporting SMP expansion, alongside creating an enabling policy and institutional environment, fully integrated into the education system.

e. Governance and coordination: Engage agencies involved in school feeding to enhance synergies between policies and goals, especially among ministries of education, agriculture, environment, health, environment, and finance.

f. Systemic leadership: Strengthen regional and country-level capacities for adaptive, innovative, and adequately resourced cross-sectoral leadership and management.

2. Establish a ‘School Meals Innovation Network’ through partnerships between the SMC, the TF for GAAHP, and others. This network will foster cross-sectoral collaboration, generate evidence for these approaches, and disseminate them across critical areas, benefitting G20 countries and LMICs. G20 support could kickstart this initiative.

3. Foster synergy between the G20 and G7 on school meals cooperation, leveraging existing developments and South-South cooperation initiatives and establishing new ones to accelerate progress. Prasad et al. (2023) argue that aligning policy priorities and implementation can promote effective multilateralism. Given the significant overlap in membership, cooperation in this area is promising. The budding Brazil-France

partnership on school meals (New Action Plan of the Brazil-France Strategic Partnership) is an example for other G20 and G7 countries to emulate.

4. Drive cooperation among G20 countries for capacity-building in the school meals domain through technical cooperation and peer-to-peer learning. This includes providing training and resources to the broader school meals ecosystem, including the education workforce, smallholder farmers, food processors, and food service providers.

Scenarios of Outcomes

Several potential development trajectories for SMPs can be considered in a scenario analysis. This analysis highlights two dimensions with significant variability:

- **School meals coverage:** Represented on the vertical axis, ranging from low to high/universal SMP coverage.
- **Degree of strategic procurement leverage:** Represented on the horizontal axis, highlighting the degree to which school food procurement is leveraged towards broader societal co-benefits, ranging from purchasing power focused solely on cost, to meeting nutritional needs, all the way to seeking multiple outcomes.

Based on these two axes, four distinct scenarios can be envisaged (Figure 2):

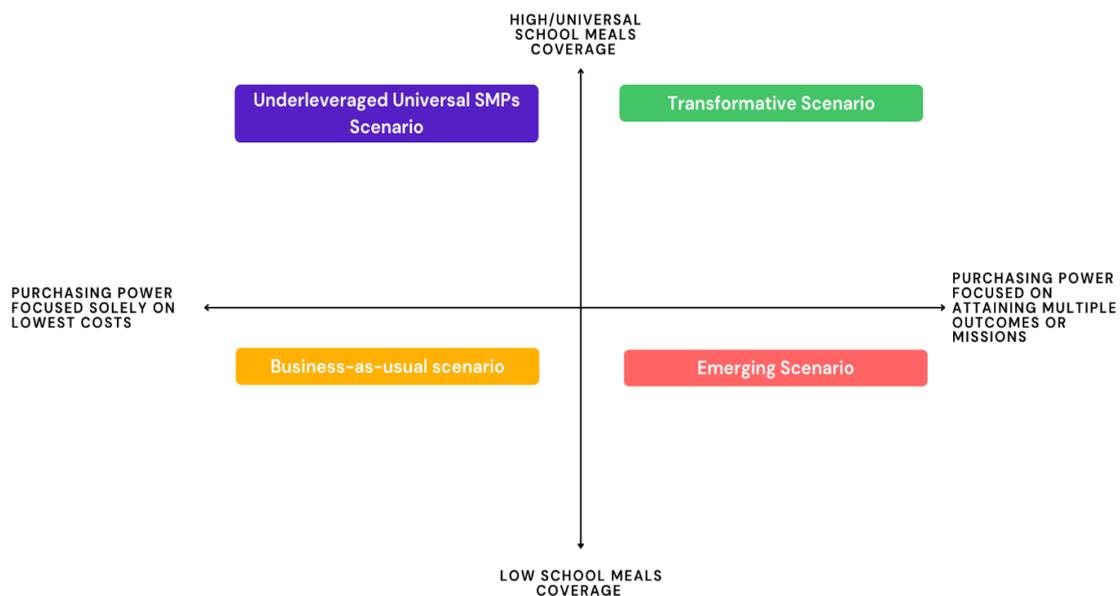


FIGURE 2. Scenarios

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Transformative Scenario: This is the ideal scenario: SMP coverage is high or universal, with governments meeting the needs of all children. Here, the sizeable demand from SMPs coupled with intentionality to leverage that demand to achieve multiple objectives makes them a strong policy lever that catalyzes systemic change. Governments align SMPs to achieve multiple outcomes such as (i) access to quality education and improved learning outcomes; (ii) enhanced nutrition for improved health outcomes; (iii) smallholder farmer and local economy support and increased resilience; (iv) transition towards planet-friendly agri-food systems by sourcing from producers that employ agroecological or regenerative agricultural practices; (v) advancing gender equality and women's economic empowerment through their greater participation in SMP value chains.

Emerging Scenario: This scenario is similar to the transformative one in that governments are leveraging the purchasing power of school meals to create social, economic, and environmental impacts. However, coverage is low as governments face bottlenecks preventing the expansion of SMPs. Scaling up is required to ensure that SMPs can catalyze the system-wide transformation of education and agri-food systems, among others.

Underleveraged Universal SMPs Scenario: Here, high or universal coverage is attained, providing children with nutritional needs. However, SMPs are not designed to attain broader goals as in the transformative scenario. Purchasing power is directed towards the lowest-cost options sourced from conventional agriculture, which contributes to unsustainable, unhealthy, and inequitable food systems. Under this scenario, other

potential outcomes, as described above, are not factored into SMP procurement decisions, hindering the potential of SMPs for transformational change.

Business as usual scenario: This scenario reflects the contexts of many LICs. It is similar to the Underleveraged Universal SMPs Scenario in that governments do not strategically leverage purchasing power, aiming simply for cost minimization. This scenario is characterized by limited coordination among ecosystem actors, leading to suboptimal results. In some instances, there may be efforts to support homegrown school feeding, but these are pilot programmes requiring investments to scale-up. However, it differs from the Underleveraged Universal SMPs Scenario in that it takes place in a context where school meal coverage is low.

Conclusion

The establishment of the SMC has sparked significant political will among governments globally to expand and enhance the quality of the SMPs. Many governments aspire and have committed to reach universal coverage by 2030 and revamp SMPs, ensuring they are agriculture-supportive, nutrition-sensitive, planet-friendly, and gender-responsive, among other aspects. The roles of the G20 and the soon-to-be-launched GAAHP in meaningfully supporting low- and middle-income countries to maximize their SMPs will be critically important. Specifically, the G20 can play a catalytic role in promoting country transitions toward transformative scenarios by supporting emerging efforts to expand nutritious, healthy, homegrown school meals to an additional 100 million vulnerable children in a planet-friendly and financially sustainable manner and in putting into action the recommendations outlined above. By doing so, the G20 would bolster efforts to scale up and retool a unique policy instrument with the potential for transformative change for children, people, the planet, prosperity, and posterity.

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[Appendix – Additional Readings](#)



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