

The Hohenheim Declaration: Recommendations for School Meals Globally or “Plan for Action”

The 5th Congress Hidden Hunger “Improving Food and Nutrition Security through School feeding” was held from September 4 to 6, 2023 at the University of Hohenheim (Stuttgart, Germany). The Congress covered the topic of nutrition in schools and all-day-care centres with the objectives:

- (1) to expand quality services
- (2) to make them accessible and affordable to all children and adolescents
- (3) to ensure food security and promote successful strategies for implementing school food programmes.

In 2022, 418 million children from 176 countries, benefitted from school meals, which was 30 million more than before the COVID-19 pandemic. On a global scale, school meals services returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, there are considerable country differences: In low-income countries some 18% of school children benefitted from school meals, whereas in high-income countries up to 61% did so [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic has had multiple impact on multiple levels: school closures not only seriously impacted on children's psyche by adding stress, and reducing scholastic performance, but also increased food insecurity, triggering further negative impacts on children's health and development [2].

The post COVID-19 recovery of nearly all school meal programmes has been supported mostly through domestic funds, although access to them is still lowest where they are most needed. This reflects the fact that some low-income countries have been unable to rebuild their national programmes because their donor support has declined.

Healthy and sustainable diets in all-day-care centres and schools are essential to prevent the deleterious health consequences of malnutrition, and to provide children and adolescents with the optimal opportunities to realise their potential for unhindered development, well-being and social inclusion.

Regular provision of nutritious and safe meals through school-based programmes can decrease absenteeism among vulnerable children, improve their attention spans, parental motivation, and academic performance towards future employment, particularly for girls [3]. Diet-related benefits can range from alleviating short-term hunger to filling critical deficiencies in micronutrients, protein and lipids intake through increased dietary diversity and nutrition education [4,5].

The positive economic impacts of school meal programmes are far-reaching: School meal programmes have created approximately four million direct employment opportunities in 85 countries, which equates to 1,377 jobs for every 100,000 children fed. The majority of these jobs involve the preparation and production of food, benefitting local farmers, cooks and small catering companies most of which in the Global South are led by women. Thus, the global annual investment of US\$ 48 billion in school meal programmes creates a large and predictable market for food. Simultaneously, there are extraordinary opportunities to transform food systems and to respond proactively to the global food crisis and food insecurity, which have been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine [1] Research has shown that efficiently-run school feeding programmes can yield impressive

returns, averaging US\$ 9 dollars for every US\$ 1 dollar invested. This is achieved by improving outcomes related to education, health and nutrition, social protection and local agriculture (e.g. through the purchasing of locally-produced food for school meals) [1, 6, 7].

In all countries, investment in school feeding programmes should have the same priority as that for education and training of children and adolescents. A holistic approach has proven to be most effective, including providing school environments with access to safe water, sanitation and washing facilities in combination with other health services, such as vaccinations and dental care. Worldwide, domestic funds support more than 90% of national school meals programmes which are universally seen to be beneficial [1, 8, 9]. The recent spectacular growth of meal coverage in some countries (e.g. in Rwanda, up from 660,000 to 3.8 million children) shows what countries can do.

Even in high-income countries, where nearly 10-20 percent of the population are at risk of poverty and food insecurity, culturally acceptable and affordable meals in all-day-care centres and schools help ensure equal opportunities for the development of children and adolescents, avoiding social discrimination and stigmatisation.

There is sufficient evidence that school meals are a decisive investment in well-being during the school years, as well as establishing life-long positive eating behaviours and social habits. These benefits may be even greater: school meals may also lead to health benefits in middle age by reducing the incidence and economic burden of non-communicable diseases, as well as helping women during pregnancy and child rearing and thus breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. These are important benefit areas which need more research [10].

Therefore, the participants of the 5th Congress Hidden Hunger declare the following:

1. **The Right to Food demands that Food Security – especially for children – is a government and public responsibility and a global priority.** Sufficient resources are needed to ensure that every child in the world has the opportunity to enjoy a nutritious school meal and the chance to learn, grow and thrive. Development agencies should target their support for school meals to the poorest countries and those most in need.
2. **Great emphasis should be given to nutrition during the first 1,000 days as well as the subsequent 7,000 days throughout growth and development.** The first 1,000 days are important and so are the next 7,000 days. Since this is also the period when countries invest massively in education, the value of appropriate nutrition and well-being is an essential contributor to learning outcomes, good health and the creation of human capital. This makes nutritious school meals a major influence on the subsequent wealth and economic development of all nations.
3. **All-day-care centres and schools need to remain open in times of crisis, and meals have to be sustained, including during school holidays.** The devastation caused by school closures due to COVID-19, is one of the major reasons why countries are now working together as the **School Meals Coalition**.
4. **School meals programmes should purchase preferentially local food and match quality diets to local production and value chains.** This will boost local agro-biodiversity, strengthen food sovereignty, and increase support to smallholder farmers, especially rural women and indigenous producers. A holistic systems approach is required because the health of populations, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the environment (including ecosystems) are closely interdependent [11]. School meal programmes should be guided by data. Context specific and food systems-

based school meals nutrition guidelines and standards should be developed to maximize their impact on children`s dietary outcome.

- 5. Climate-smart school meal programmes should be in the vanguard of country efforts to become more climate resilient and part of the global nutrition transformation.** Strengthening the connection between school feeding, nutrition and lifestyle education, including creating school gardens will help establish life-long desirable dietary habits and additional supply. The social experience of eating meals together can also teach manners and social skills. There is need for more research to explore the effects of the quality of school meals and school feeding programmes on cognitive and physical performance, as well as on social behaviour including the impacts on the food environment.

The undersigned hope that the adoption of the **Hohenheim Declaration** will ensure that school feeding programmes continue to be one of the largest social safety nets in the world. Children are our future. Efficient, effective and sustainable school feeding programs will thus contribute to safeguarding the future of our children and our planet.

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