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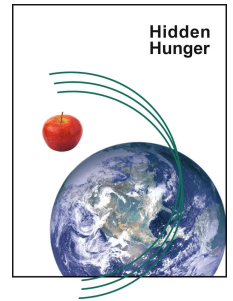


SOCIETY OF NUTRITION
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Summary Report

Online-Symposium on November 16, 2022: "Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on Catering in Schools"

in advance to the 5th Congress Hidden Hunger (September 4-6, 2023)

(All names are given without academic titles)

Introduction and background

The goal of the online symposium was to learn from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more specifically, to discuss the consequences of school closures on child and adolescent nutrition and development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were repeated prolonged school closures. With regard to children and adolescents, these have led above all to severe losses of social contacts and to tense situations in the household. In addition to the numerous public reports and discussions about these consequences of the pandemic, one aspect that is essential for the healthy development of children and adolescents has been completely overlooked: the fact that school closures also mean the closure of school canteens. With this COVID-19 protective measure, an important daily meal was no longer available for many young people. This is especially critical for those who come from low-income families. For them, daycare and school meals are often the only hot, wholesome meal available. Studies of children and adolescents have shown that the course for healthy cognitive and physical development and a healthy life is already set in childhood. A prerequisite for this is a regular and balanced diet. Children and adolescents from low-income families may suffer from unnoticed micronutrient deficiencies (so-called hidden hunger) as well as obesity much more frequently than those from secure and financially better-off backgrounds. The reason is a predominant consumption of low-priced, mostly high-calorie and

low-micronutrient foods with a high fat and sugar content, which are increasingly demanded by this group of people.

The symposium was organized by the Institute of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Hohenheim and the Society of Nutrition and Food Science (SNFS) e.V. in cooperation with the German Nutrition Society in Germany. It took place in the run-up to the 5th Congress Hidden Hunger 2023 and was secured thanks to financial support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Office for Agriculture and Food (BLE).

A total of 93 people from 27 countries worldwide registered for the symposium. The audience consisted of members of the scientific community, representatives from politics, government and the media as well as members of civil society organizations, advocacy groups and private and public sector bodies.

Scientific program and key messages

Welcome and opening:

The program of the online symposium consisted of a welcome address by Stephan Dabbert, Rector of the University of Hohenheim, and an introductory opening speech by Ulrike Arens-Azevêdo from the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (Germany), who as one of the scientific chairs led through the program of the symposium.

Keynote lecture:

Donald Bundy from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (UK) gave a keynote lecture on the topic of "School Meals: Their multisectoral benefits and the role of the School Meals Coalition in restoring and improving national programmes". He summarized and concluded that COVID-19 school closures precipitated the largest education crisis in history, leaving learners excluded not only from education but also from the health and wellbeing services routinely provided through schools. Between January and April 2020, an estimated 370 million children were immediately deprived of their school meal, which was for many their only substantive meal of the day. To respond to this crisis, the School Meals Coalition was established by (now) more than 70 governments who pledged to rebuild, improve and scale up their national school health and nutrition programmes, guided by credible, independent evidence generated by the Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition.

Lecture sessions and panel discussions:

The question of what solutions exist to maintain adequate food service under pandemic conditions to better prepare for potential future pandemics was dealt with in the context of two lecture sessions with three presentations each and a panel discussion at the end of each session. Different approaches from different countries to compensate for periods of school and cafeteria closures were discussed. A number of countries have specifically addressed the problem of failing daycare and school nutrition. Low-income countries, where the issue of a lack of school meals has

been particularly acute, as well as high-income countries, where the lack of daily midday meals has also led to significant gaps in coverage, were highlighted.

The first lecture session included presentations by:

- Elliot M. Berry from the Braun School of Public Health at the Hebrew University (Israel) on the topic of “School feeding programs in Israel: Lessons from Covid”,
- Patricia Eustachio Colombo from the MRC Epidemiology Unit and London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (UK) on the topic of “The importance of school lunches to children’s dietary intake and pathways to sustainable dietary habits” and
- Coudra Nijembazi from the Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V. (Germany, Burundi) on the topic of “Importance of local stakeholder collaboration in the responsible management of school feeding programmes during the covid-19 pandemic in schools in Burundi”.

The lecture by Elliot Berry referred to Israel. He concluded that Israel should make long-term improvements to School Feeding Programs (SFPs). Eliminating food insecurity among children must be an explicit legislative goal for maintaining SFP in emergency situations and the responsibility for routine food insecurity monitoring falls to the government. Mr. Berry stated that SFPs must have rigorous independent program evaluations as well as that a „universal“ SFP must be developed to improve the health of children, across all socioeconomic backgrounds to realize their full physical and cognitive potential and to prepare for the next pandemic and crisis.

With regard to the country of Sweden, Patricia Eustachio Colombo commented that school meals play an important role to children’s dietary intake, especially among socially disadvantaged groups. It is possible to develop optimized school meals that are both nutritionally adequate and sustainable, without increasing their costs. She emphasized that optimized, sustainable school lunch menus can be implemented without undesirable effects on food waste, consumption, and children’s school meal satisfaction. Sustainable dietary habits fostered by school meals can reduce the occurrence of future pandemics.

At the end of the first lecture session and from the view of life in Burundi, Coudra Nijembazi’s lecture particularly emphasized the importance of stakeholder collaboration in the responsible management of school feeding programs and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic in schools.

The subsequent panel discussion with the aforementioned speakers was moderated by Ernestine Tecklenburg from the German Nutrition Society (DGE) (Germany) and addressed the following three key questions:

- What did we see (in low and high-income countries) as reaction on the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What kind of instruments/measures/interventions are working in which way?
- What interventions are the best?

Lively discussions took place. Ulrike Arens-Azevêdo also took part in the panel discussion. In addition to the measures and tools mentioned in the presentations, the importance of school gardens, a fair nutrition environment in schools, and promoting the acceptance of school meals were highlighted. By answering questions from the audience, helpful insights and tips could be given.

The second lecture session included presentations by:

- Gianluca Brunori from the University of Pisa (Italy) on the topic of “Covid-19 and sustainable food systems. What should we learn before the next emergency?”,
- Urszula Ala-Karvia from the University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute (Finland) on the topic of “Covid-19 driven adaptations in the provision of school meals in the Baltic Sea Region – the launch of a takeaway school meal” and
- Alphonse Ngicho from the Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V. (Germany, South Sudan) on the topic of “School Nutrition Adaption During Covid-19 – The Case of South Sudan”.

Gianluca Brunori stated that three key transitions leading to a “safe and just” operating space, with a focus on food systems, emerged during the development of a foresight study promoted by SCAR (Standing Committee on Agricultural Research): (1.) sustainable and healthy diets for all; (2.) full circularity in the use of resources; (3.) diversity as a key component of stable systems. As a consequence of COVID-19, food emerged again as a central element of life, along with health, after decades in which food security was taken for granted, at least in most developed countries. He explained that during the pandemic, it was clear that food security depended much more on social and economic conditions than on technical aspects of food production and processing: monitoring vulnerabilities, safety belts, social capital. The pandemic could also be an opportunity to re-think and re-value labor relationships in the sector as well as local productions and supply chains. A full circularity in food systems also would benefit from stronger links established at the territorial level and increase the attention on the quality of the environment, leading to the adoption of benign practices, regenerating rather than impoverishing natural resources. Diversity is a key element of a resilient system, both biophysical and social, as they are mutually dependent: new business models, new knowledge sharing networks, new markets contribute to maintaining diversity.

The key message of Urszula Ala-Karvia was that COVID-19 has placed an incredible pressure, among others, on school meal providers. Initiating a take away school lunch, in slightly different forms, in several Baltic Sea Region (BSR) countries is a great example of innovativeness and high adaptability of the school meal service providers leading to a new definition of a takeaway school meal as an innovative and nutritious meal that supports a community and increasing acceptability of school meals.

Finally, Alphonse Ngicho concluded that school nutrition is a beneficial component in restoring wellbeing of the learners in emergencies. To ensure holistic wellbeing of learners, it should be complemented with other multisectoral responses and support systems.

The subsequent panel discussion with the aforementioned speakers was moderated by Regina Birner from the University of Hohenheim (Germany) and addressed the following three key questions:

- What are the most important lessons for future emergencies that may involve school closures?
- Can we also draw lessons for crises that are caused by high food prices?
- What role does free healthy and sustainable school catering play for children’s food and nutrition security during crises?

The panel discussion including questions from the audience again provided space for lively and enriching discussions.

Closing and concluding remarks:

The program ended with concluding remarks given by Hans Konrad Biesalski. Ulrike Arens-Azevêdo closed the online symposium. The organizing team thanks all speakers for their valuable contributions. The audience of the symposium had the opportunity to listen to very exciting and inspiring lectures and discussions with interesting and insightful viewpoints and results.

Overall conclusion

Already at the time of the last preparatory steps, the members of the organizing team noticed that the Covid-19 pandemic no longer plays a major role in the community. This was also reflected in the lectures and discussions, which focused more on school catering than on the Covid-19 pandemic. Another important conclusion is that school meals are not only important in terms of food security, but also play an important role in terms of social participation. In terms of the socio-ecological transformation of the food system, school catering is an important pillar. It offers a non-negligible opportunity to anchor this transformation already in the minds of the growing generations. Here, the transformation should be on the agenda "from the very beginning".

When it comes to the importance of school nutrition, it is essential to remember that it is particularly relevant for children from low-income families that they receive a qualitatively balanced school diet. The physical and cognitive development of these children is not only related to the home environment, but also to a regular and adequate diet for their age. Low-income countries can also show middle- and high-income countries what they can learn about the consequences of inadequate nutrition, but also about strategies for improving nutrition. Here, models such as those used in countries where child nutritional poverty is prevalent can also be applied in rich nations.

The online symposium took place in advance to the 5th Congress Hidden Hunger (September 4-6, 2023). The congress will address issues around school nutrition, including strategies, quality, and the great importance of regular school nutrition available to all. The main focus will be on scientific contributions that are likely to make school nutrition a central issue in the promotion of children's health in all countries of the world.

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