



SCHOOL MEALS: A critical component of food systems transformation

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ School meals are a critical source of nutrition, with over 300 million children worldwide benefiting from school feeding programs.
- ◆ School-driven food systems transformation can help improve nutritional outcomes and reduce gender gaps in health for economically vulnerable children, while developing a sustainable local economy for healthy meals.
- ◆ IDRC supports research to build understanding of school feeding programs, including how school feeding interfaces with local food systems.

BACKGROUND

With millions of children worldwide attending school hungry, school meals provide a critical source of nutrition. School feeding programs – which provide economically vulnerable children with regular meals at school – have well documented benefits. For instance, providing regular and nutritious school meals supports improved health and education outcomes – including increased school attendance; improved academic performance; reduced gender gaps in health (for instance, in relation to early reproduction); and lower dropout rates, particularly for girls. Such programs can also support sustainable local food systems by creating a market for local farmers' produce.

Despite the positive impacts of school feeding programs, their influence on food system policies and processes is understudied. However, governments and international agencies are now recognizing the need to generate country-specific evidence on

how school meals and institutional procurement can influence the supply of and demand for healthy diets. Further, increased climate awareness has presented a window of opportunity for governments to use national school meal programs to implement environmentally-friendly food policies. Such policies can improve child health and generate demand for regenerative and resilient local food production and consumption.

ONGOING RESEARCH

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is supporting research to help build understanding of and improve interventions for school feeding programs. The overall aim is to identify opportunities for strengthening environmental sustainability and health outcomes.

To support the Research Consortium, a global initiative of the School Meals Coalition, IDRC funds a [project](#) assessing how school feeding and procurement can be



© Panos/Crispin Hughes

an effective pathway for food system transformation. The project specifically focuses on how this pathway can be shaped to benefit low-income communities, women, and other marginalized groups. Through this project, the School Meals Coalition is expanding its research focus into Africa – starting with Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and Nigeria. The results will improve understanding of how to build more economically and environmentally resilient local food systems, in turn informing policies and programs to reach the most vulnerable children.

Meanwhile, several countries (inc. Ghana, Kenya, Senegal) are focused on advancing double-duty policy bundles (DDPBs) that address the double burden of malnutrition (see [CCHeFS Policy Bundles brief](#)). DDPBs play a vital role in food systems transformation by integrating nutrition- and health-sensitive policies into broader strategies (e.g., environmental and agricultural policies) for food systems change. These food policy “bundles” include institutional procurement, particularly school food procurement.

A new project on school feeding programs (SFPs) will target food insecurity in Kenya and Rwanda, especially among urban children. The project aims to target the critical role of smallholder farmers and micro- and small-enterprises in providing nutritious school meals, through advocating for policy reforms, strengthening capacities and increasing demand for healthy food in urban poor areas, aiming to amplify the impact of ongoing efforts in both countries.

These projects are among several being supported through IDRC's partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, the [Catalyzing Change for Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems](#) initiative.

OTHER RESEARCH

IDRC is also expanding its investment in this area through new work on Home Grown School Feeding Programs (HGSFP). These programs have become widespread across Africa, reaching over 64.5 million children in more than 46 countries and are recognized as a top priority by the African Union to address poverty and food security. IDRC-supported research will aim to address research gaps in upstream subsystems of HGSFPs, including production, processing, distribution, and engagement of farmers and other food system actors.

The Catalyzing Change for Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems initiative (CCHeFS) is funded jointly by the Rockefeller Foundation and Canada's International Development Research Centre: www.idrc.ca/cchefs

