



World Food
Programme

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES AS A SOCIAL PROTECTION TOOL IN THE RBC REGION

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KEY MESSAGES

- Well-designed school feeding programmes contribute directly to SDG2, SDG4 and SDG5 and indirectly to SDG1, SDG3, SDG8, SDG10 and SDG16¹. Most countries in the RBC region have a NSFP in place, serving a range of objectives such as food security, social protection, education, nutrition, and social cohesion. Moreover, school feeding programmes serve as shock responsive safety nets and as fiscally sustainable investments in human capital as part of global efforts to achieve Education for All and provide social protection to the poor.
- National governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries have invested significant efforts to adopt the 2030 agenda; eradicate extreme poverty, end hunger, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.
- Despite the progress made, many SDGs are still **far from reached** due to persisting challenges such as armed conflicts, economic crises, political tensions and population movements. In the global call for a **decade of action** to deliver SDGs, governments, UN agencies, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders are urged to engage in generating solutions and **accelerating action** to address systemic gaps in implementation of the 2030 agenda, by finding innovative and transformative solutions delivering multiple benefits to meet the sizable needs and accelerate progress.
- School feeding programmes represent one of **the largest safety nets** in countries across the region – measured in terms of coverage – in the broader framework of national social protection policy and programmes². Many countries in WFP's Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia & Eastern Europe region are considering social **protection reform** and exploring options to improve coverage and adequacy of national programmes. Such reforms can, in principle, offer a good opportunity to invest in school **feeding programmes** and maximize their contribution to social protection by considering certain linkages and design features.
- Moreover, it is essential - now more than ever - for **WFP to step up the action**, as it positions itself in the space of “**changing lives**” of those in need, by leveraging its expertise in running, designing, monitoring and evaluating school feeding programmes to national governments.
- This brief outlines why and how strengthening linkages between school feeding programmes and social protection can maximize the benefits of National School Feeding Programmes (NSFPs) as safety nets, in countries covered by the Regional Bureau for Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.



WFP's Primary School Meals Programme helps to ensure school-aged children in the Kyrgyz Republic have the energy for intellectual and physical development, such as these students at Mamytov Primary School.



WHY SCHOOL FEEDING IS INTEGRAL TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

Global footprint, expertise and opportunities...

- **WFP's significant presence through school feeding programmes in the region and globally.** Leveraging the school feeding presence offers many possibilities, including optimizing school meals from a nutrition as well as from a social protection perspective. In this region, school feeding is a key footprint for WFP, with most countries engaged in various ways and with an approximately 5.5 million of children reached. Globally, WFP supports school feeding programmes in nearly 70 countries. In 16.4 ,2018 million school children benefitted from WFP nutritious meals and snacks. WFP has supported capacity-building of 65 governments, in support of improved NSFPs for another 39 million children. Since 44 ,1990 national governments have fully taken over school meal programmes from WFP.
- **WFP's strategic shift to the "changing lives" space.** WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, delivering food assistance and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience. In development contexts, WFP focuses on the poorest and most vulnerable people who suffer the most from issues arising from hunger. WFP works with governments and communities including through social protection systems to help create sustainable solutions for food security. WFP can help governments develop policies, services and infrastructure that will enable communities and countries to thrive in the long term.
- **UN reform and the new cooperation framework.** The new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework is the most important instrument for planning and implementation of UN development activities at the country level in support of the 2030 Agenda³. The new Cooperation Frameworks have primary objectives to clearly articulate the UN collective response to help countries address national priorities and gaps in their pathway towards meeting the SDGs, acting as a vehicle for supporting economic transformation that advances the rights and well-being of all citizens and strengthen economies. This provides a valuable opportunity for WFP to reposition itself in the social protection space, through existing expertise in supporting NSFPs.

...combined with regional and local imperatives

- **Ongoing social protection reform in the MENA region.** Since Arab Spring, and in a context of growing budgetary deficits and tightening of fiscal space, countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Yemen are reforming their social protection systems towards more targeted social assistance schemes and social transfers. This provides opportunities to advocate for strengthened NSFPs to support the meeting of social protection objectives towards poverty alleviation and reduction, as well as educational and food security and nutrition objectives.
- **National school feeding programmes are politically popular.** They exist in many countries and provide an opportunity to rebuild the social contract where it has been challenged. Popular uprisings have highlighted a breakdown in the social contract and reforms may challenge that further, therefore showing that reforms can be meaningful in providing important safety nets such as school feeding and scaling those up can help to start bridge the social contract.



- **Limited coverage by social protection systems;** It is estimated that only one third of the MENA region populations are enrolled in formal social security schemes. More importantly, if subsidies are excluded, social safety net programmes in MENA represent a small percent of GDP (0.7%) and are generally fragmented. According to the World Bank, most of the poor and vulnerable fall through the cracks: two out of three people in the poorest quintile are not reached by non-subsidy SSNs.⁴
- **Relatively large number of children:** Of the total estimated 467 million people living in the MENA region in 2016, 36.2 per cent were under the age of 18, and 11.6 per cent were under the age of 5. The relatively large number of children in the region reinforces the importance of focusing on school feeding as a child sensitive programme that could address multiple vulnerabilities.
- **Prolonged conflict:** the persistence of conflicts in several countries in the region, such as Iraq, Yemen and Syria, impart even greater importance to the focus on child-sensitive social protection programmes. Especially in countries in conflict, investing in children is of utmost importance given the key role they play in peace, development and social transformation while growing up.
- **Gender disparities and high rates of out-of-school children in conflict affected countries;** humanitarian crises have severely affected children's access to education, particularly in Yemen, Syria and Sudan, where it is estimated that over 3.8⁵ million children of primary school age are out of school, representing 90 per cent of all out-of-school primary-school-age children in the region. Girls in Iraq, Yemen and Sudan are less likely to complete primary education than boys, while in other countries with available data the completion rate for girls is slightly higher than for boys. Overall, gender disparities are most pronounced at the tertiary level with girls being clearly disadvantaged.
- **Low level of human capital development;** research suggests that in MENA there is a high rate of undeveloped human capital due to gender disparities⁶. Other factors tend to play a big role such as the investment strategies including in education. The low level of human capital productivity has been especially attributed to inequality in individual merits and qualifications which could point back to the importance of education in developing of human capital.



SCHOOL FEEDING THROUGH A SOCIAL PROTECTION LENS

In Armenia, WFP food is supplemented with fruit and vegetables purchased by parent-teacher committees from local smallholder farmers to enhance nutritional value of the meals.

Lifecycle approach

Social protection aims primarily to protect members of society from shocks and stresses over the lifecycle – school feeding can support the early part of that. The lifecycle approach reflects that individuals face different risks and vulnerabilities at different stages in life, and that social protection can be designed to address these risks at each stage. The main characteristic of the lifecycle approach is that it involves long term planning -programmes directed at particular stages of the life cycle. It focuses resources on lifecycle risks.

The different stages in the life cycle⁷ constitute a substantive classification system in which, each is considered to have differentiated roles, connections and positions relative to the social environment, presenting specific characteristics that are not, however, necessarily homogeneous or fixed across different social groups and countries.

School feeding programmes are one of the most prevalent/common social protection tools for school age children⁸⁹, with its multiple benefits addressing the different risks associated with this stage of children's lives. As a social support measure, school feeding programmes help keep children in school and provide an entry point into communities to introduce other safety nets. Moreover, school feeding programmes exist in many countries and, where there is no or an insufficient cash transfer programme, school feeding programmes are potentially the largest, and often the only, direct transfer programme that can help address chronic vulnerabilities related to food and nutrition insecurity in underserved or at-risk populations.

Nutrition and Education

At the same time, social protection programmes are at the heart of boosting human capital for the world's most vulnerable. They empower people to be healthy, pursue their education, and seek opportunity to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Research suggests that school feeding programmes can make significant contributions to human development and lead to improvement in education, health, economic and agricultural indicators. However, these contributions must be intended, clearly outlined as explicit objectives of the programme.

Evidence shows that strengthened school feeding programmes, embedded in national education and social protection systems, are critical pathways to bring forward more inclusive social policies, including in relation to child nutrition and health, education, and gender and equity. That is also why they are increasingly being leveraged as interventions that contribute to human capital development and critical in supporting the longer-term resilience of vulnerable households to seasonal, economic and climate-related shocks.

RELEVANCE ACROSS THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT SPECTRUM

- **In contexts of development**, school feeding programmes **can contribute to broader national social protection objectives towards addressing poverty and other vulnerabilities**¹⁰. For instance, school feeding programmes can relieve short term hunger and improve nutrition status of pre-school children, primary school children and adolescents, by addressing macronutrient and micronutrient deficiencies. This leads to enhanced nutrition and health, decreased morbidity, and increased learning capacities. They can also facilitate access to education, increase enrolment and attendance rates and improve the cognitive development of children. When adequately designed, school feeding programmes can narrow gender gaps and help break the vicious cycle of discrimination against girls.
- Moreover, in poor communities, **economic benefits from school feeding programmes are easily evident—reducing poverty by boosting income for households and communities**. For instance, the transfer value of food provided in school is equivalent to about 10 percent of a household's income, even more in the case of take-home rations¹¹. For families with several children, that can mean substantial savings, therefore school feeding programmes are often part of social safety nets in low- and middle-income countries, and can be a stable way to reliably target pro-poor investments into communities, as well as a system that can be scaled-up rapidly to respond to crises.
- **In emergency contexts**¹², in the relative absence of social protection infrastructure, school feeding programmes could rapidly expand their role as a social safety net, taking food rapidly and directly into the communities that need help the most. Expanding school feeding programmes as a social assistance¹³ programme (see Fig. 1) can be a smart response by low and middle-income countries, using the safety net option that is most immediately available to them. **Evidence from previous real income shocks suggests that there is a significant risk to educational outcomes**

for the poor when commodity prices increase, that can result in negative coping strategies including taking children out of school. **The availability of school meals and take-home rations can act as a strong incentive to keep children in school**¹⁴.

- Countries can further add value through complementary activities in schools, such as nutrition education, school gardens, WASH, psychosocial support, deworming and providing micronutrients, while concurrently making these parts of a multi-pronged approach in enhancing national social protection systems. School feeding programmes can play a key role in providing an immediate response to social and economic shocks.
- Evidence highlights the importance of public investment in school feeding programmes as an integrated essential package to promote education, health and development of school-age children and adolescents in low- and lower-middle-income countries. It shows that when school meals are combined with nutrition and health components, the modest cost of the package for those ages 5–19 is a high return and low-cost investment that addresses the most pressing development needs throughout the first two decades¹⁵.





A CLOSER LOOK AT THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

The RBC region presents one of most complex settings with a wide range of development and humanitarian challenges, including inequitable development pathways, resource scarcity, limited production potential, dependence on food imports, increasing poverty, double burden of malnutrition, and conflict-induced crises that have caused the largest displacement and refugee crisis since World War II. Nearly 15 million children between 5-14 years old are out of school in MENA, and 10 million are in school but at risk of dropping out due to poverty and social marginalization, as well as migration, displacement and disruption of infrastructure caused by conflict.

Eight countries in the region have NSFPs owned, managed and funded by national authorities: Algeria, Armenia, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Tunisia. A mapping of the objectives of NSFPs shows that majority of these have **access to education** as a primary objective, while for others nutrition and/or social protection remains the main objective. In conflict affected countries such as Syria and Yemen, WFP runs large scale school feeding

programmes in close coordination with national government. In Lebanon and Libya, WFP runs small scale school feeding programmes, in partnership with governments. Ministry of Education remains the main counterpart, except for Egypt whose main engagement besides Ministry of Education is the Ministry of Social Solidarity. The regional integration of school feeding programmes in the national social protection policies and strategies is still weak.

Moreover, NSFPs in MENA are the largest child-sensitive¹⁶ social protection scheme, classified as supporting access to education, and the most prevalent child sensitive SP scheme linked to nutrition in a 2018 study by UNICEF¹⁷. The study also mapped national social protection schemes linked to nutrition, and most of these were NSFPs. These findings provide a good opportunity to advocate for expanding, improving and institutionalizing school feeding programmes, to achieve better social protection, education and nutrition outcomes.

SIX (6) ACTIONS FOR WFP TO LINK SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE RBC REGION

1. Invest in evidence building for stronger advocacy and better positioning

Evidence is a key advocacy tool for WFP to promote school feeding as a social protection tool. WFP can support government in conducting cost/benefit analyses to look at the effectiveness and efficiency of school feeding programmes. This would demonstrate contributions to national education and social protection goals, which can then form part of advocacy to strengthen NSFPs. In addition, WFP can conduct Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) exercise to better assess the integration of school feeding in the national policy framework, assessing how is school feeding embedded in national social protection policies and strategies.

For example, in partnership with the International Food Policy Research Institute, WFP assessed school feeding as a social safety net and its contribution to poverty alleviation in Armenia. The analysis showed that the estimated contribution of the programme to poverty reduction was 0.4 percentage points. The study also notes that if the impact on poverty reduction is to increase, targeting and the level of financial transfers require revision. While capacity to perform budget and econometric analysis¹⁸ may not be available in house to inform policy decision making, WFP can partner with agencies – including UNICEF and ILO – who have available tools and approaches for modelling costs pertaining to social protection systems.

2. Promote school feeding as a nutrition-sensitive safety net by providing nutritious healthy meals, including nutrition education and behavior change communication



Jayad, 9, at school in Tur Al-Baha district, Lahj, Yemen. He wants to become a doctor when he grows up. He said he likes eating WFP high-energy biscuits because they contain vitamins and minerals.

wide set of complementary activities such as the provision of healthy fresh meals, the promotion of nutrition and healthy eating habits, alongside hygiene, physical and environmental awareness activities. In 2019 – 2020, WFP produced communication materials indicating the recommended frequency of eating various food groups, and emphasizing a balanced diet, including fruit and vegetables, which was distributed in more than 1,200 schools.

3. Promote school feeding as a social safety net that contributes to peacebuilding & social cohesion

In countries affected by conflict, or countries where social inequalities are prevalent, investing in children is of utmost importance given the important role they play in peace, development and social transformation while growing up. WFP can advocate for increased support for schoolchildren and their families and for those who are out of school, combined

with immediate response with strategic investments for the future, which is crucial to peacebuilding and to ensuring that there are no “lost generations” without access to education. Moreover, school feeding programmes can promote peacebuilding by increasing social integration and cohesion.

For example, WFP’s support to the NSFP in Kyrgyzstan is delivered in partnership with parent and teacher associations (PTAs) among others. PTAs function as project management committees, providing daily oversight of the quality of the food, and support for the day-to-day running of the programme. Through PTAs and other formal parental committees, civic action could link participants into more formal structures of civil society. This creates an opportunity for rural communities to become more aware of the potential role of civil society in enhancing governance and to gain knowledge and experience of the various legal and regulatory frameworks that govern their everyday lives, such as the rights of children, the regulation of voluntary contributions and the responsibilities of schools. This engagement helps build negotiation skills, provides experience of engaging with local authorities and enhances rural community members’ interest in, capacity and opportunities to be more active in civil society.

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