

School Meals as Climate-Smart Investments: Scaling National Impact

This advocacy brief presents a key opportunity for members and partners of the School Meals Coalition to position school meals as a proven, scalable, climate-smart investment that delivers across nutrition, resilience and food systems transformation. Anchored in national ownership and guided by evidence, school meal programmes represent a practical and effective pathway to deliver on countries' climate, food systems and sustainable development commitments, benefiting people, profit and planet. This brief provides Coalition members and partners with key messages of school meals and recommendations for action scaling national impact.

WHY POSITION SCHOOL MEALS AS A CLIMATE-SMART INVESTMENT:

The latest edition of [WFP's State of School Feeding Worldwide report](#) reveals that school meal programmes are now reaching at least 466 million children globally, an increase of at least 80 million children since 2020. They are recognized as nationally-owned policy levers, with 99 percent of financing provided by governments. They deliver multiple dividends: improved child health and learning, stronger local economies and more sustainable food systems. When designed as home-grown school feeding programmes, they also become a lever for climate action. They strengthen local food systems, promote regenerative practices, generate jobs for women, men and youth, and align procurement with national climate and development goals. School kitchens become an entry point for clean and efficient cooking solutions, which reduce emissions, protect the environment from deforestation and land degradation, improve health and make food preparation safer and more sustainable.

By including school meals in the [Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty policy basket](#), countries position school meals as a tool for sustainable resilience and equity, aiming to reach an [additional 150 million children](#) with school meal programmes by 2030 in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. This creates a key opportunity for the Coalition to elevate school meals as a climate-smart investment on the global stage.

Building on the UN Deputy-Secretary General's call at the UN Food Systems Summit+4 in July to "move school meals from a climate blind spot to a climate solution", key actors are already responding, urging all countries to embed regenerative, home-grown school meals into their national climate plans, biodiversity strategies and related financing plans. This call to action underscores the growing recognition of school meals, if well-designed, as a climate intervention, one that nourishes children, bolsters rural livelihoods and regenerates the planet.

Coalition members and partners have a collective opportunity to:

- Position school meals as a nationally-owned, ready-to-scale solution for adaptation and resilience. With over [466 million children](#) already reached and 99% of financing from domestic budgets, members can show how programmes are delivering resilience today and how they can be anchored in NDCs and National Adaptation Plans.

- Demonstrate linkages with sustainable food systems. The [State of School Feeding report](#) highlights how school meals can align demand-side measures (nutritious, sustainable menus, predictable procurement standards and nutrition guidelines) with supply-side outcomes (stimulating sustainable local production, expanding local markets and generating jobs in farming, preparation and supply chains).
- Highlight national leadership and commitment. Several Coalition member governments, especially in Africa where [20 million more children](#) have been reached in the last two years, can highlight their progress as a successful model of ambition and delivery.
- Emphasize the return on investment. School meal programmes deliver up to [US\\$7 – US\\$35 in returns for every US\\$1 invested](#), making them one of the most cost-effective strategies for advancing education, health, nutrition, local economies, and promoting climate resilience by supporting sustainable agriculture including through increasing local sourcing and planet-friendly diets.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation, through coordinated efforts across education, agriculture, health, social protection, energy and environmental sectors.

SCHOOL MEALS AS CLIMATE-SMART INVESTMENTS

- With [99% of financing](#) for school meals now coming from national budgets, governments are treating school meals as a strategic investment in human capital, resilience and food systems transformation.
- Beyond school meals, these programmes can be [a significant source of employment](#),– from smallholder farmers to caterers, transporters and cooks - generating linkages that strengthen local economies. Many of those jobs are held by women, making school meals a powerful lever for women's economic empowerment, youth employment and inclusive growth. that strengthen local economies. Many of those jobs are held by women, making school meals a powerful lever for women's economic empowerment, youth employment and inclusive growth.
- For every US\$ 1 invested, school meal programmes have the power to generate [US\\$ 7 to US\\$ 35](#) in returns across education, health, social protection and agriculture. Few public investments offer such wide-ranging cross-sectoral dividends.
- School meals deliver multi-sectoral benefits, including climate gains when well-designed, very limited climate-related development finance is currently channelled to school meals. Between 2018-2021, [only 0.005% \(\\$ 5.5 million per year\)](#) of total climate-related development finance were directed to school meals. Yet, today many national school meal programmes already deliver climate benefits by reducing emissions through clean cooking, shorter and greener supply chains, and promoting more local, and regenerative food systems. School meals represent an untapped investment opportunity in climate finance.
- School meal programmes present a strong opportunity to demonstrate clear climate benefits, highlight national leadership such as [Burundi and Malawi](#) that have included school meals in their NDCs and call on governments and funders to channel greater climate financing toward these high-impact, nationally-owned programmes, transforming a long-standing climate blind spot into investments for climate action.

Country Examples:

- Italy and Egypt's [US\\$ 22 million](#) debt swap (2003 – 2022) supported over 93,000 students and their families with fortified date bars and conditional food rations respectively, boosting attendance especially among girls. Germany's [US\\$ 83 million](#) debt swap (2013 – ongoing), in partnership with WFP, delivered nutritious school meals, upgraded school infrastructure and piloted integrated rural development. The initiative improved education, livelihoods and resilience through training, microfinance, and youth-focused opportunities.
- Since 2017, Guatemala has committed to revitalizing the local economy by sourcing [70 percent](#) of school food from family farmers. A mobile application developed by the Ministry of Education and WFP connects over [500 farmers to 840 schools](#), streamlining the procurement process, promoting transparency and ensuring that fresh products reach students in an efficient manner. This has helped bridge the gap between smallholder agriculture and schools, fostering sustainable development and food security.
- Brazil mandated that [at least 30% of school meal funds](#) be spent on family farming, emphasizing the inclusion of women in food procurement and the establishment of a school food council for oversight.
- Bangladesh has a deliberate focus on [creating leadership and income-generating opportunities](#) for women, and a position within each School Management Committee (SMC) was designated to empower women in decision-making.
- School meal programmes of Croatia and San Marino focused on [creating job opportunities for individuals with disabilities](#) within their school feeding initiatives, effectively promoting social inclusion through employment.
- Syria's school meal programs aimed to [support women by offering job opportunities](#) in sandwich preparation and by providing training to enhance qualifications, alongside opportunities for youth in food distribution.

TRANSFORMING GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS

- Global food systems account for [one third of all greenhouse gas emissions](#), contributing to extreme weather shocks, biodiversity loss and food insecurity.
- School meals are a proven climate-smart investment that strengthens local food systems. By sourcing food locally and shortening supply chains, school meal programmes reduce the carbon footprint associated with transport and storage and empower local smallholder farmers, including rural women. In doing so, they help build more inclusive and adaptive food systems.
- School meal programmes make up [70% of the global public food system](#), meaning that changes to consumption and production practices within school meals programmes can have significant impact on planetary health.
- When designed as homegrown school feeding programmes, school meals create predictable demand for local farmers. This demand can be directed towards agroecological and regenerative practices that restore soil health, protect biodiversity and reduce emissions, ensuring children's meals also build longer term resilience in farming communities.

Country examples:

- Cambodia is prioritizing sourcing from local smallholder farmers, with a goal of procuring 70% of food locally to create stable markets, boost rural incomes, and strengthen community resilience. Women are at the heart of this effort, making up 75% of smallholder farmers, 74% of

suppliers, and 66% of cooks engaged in the programme, ([Sustainable Financing Initiative Homegrown School Feeding Report, 2025](#)).

[SHAPING FUTURE EATING HABITS](#)

- Shifting to diverse, nutrient-dense, planet-friendly foods with low environmental impact can [cut school meals carbon emissions by 26-43%](#).
- By reaching young schoolchildren at a crucial age when dietary preferences are still forming, school meals programmes that can shape the future eating habits of a generation towards planet-friendly choices. In the long-term, this can create demand from the agriculture sector for healthy foods sourced from environmentally sustainable local farm systems, over time promoting regenerative farming methods, biodiversity, resilience against extreme weather shocks, and economic growth.

Government examples:

- Kenya embeds [planet-friendly practices](#) by using local, drought-tolerant crops, clean cooking solutions and smallholder sourcing to cut emissions and strengthen local food systems. The expansion of Kenya's school meal programmes involves a shift from carbon-heavy food imports to locally grown drought-tolerant crops and vegetables and a move towards cleaner cooking methods. In doing so, Kenya aims to transform its food systems, reduce its carbon footprint and support its clean energy transition.
- Armenia funds [180 school meal days annually](#), with national nutrition guidelines and growing links to local producers for sustainable food systems.
- Finland: Universal school meals include [weekly vegetarian days](#), organic milk and local fish.
- Policies promote low-carbon procurement and student involvement in menu planning.

[NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND POLICY MOMENTUM](#)

- The number of countries with a dedicated school [meals](#) policy has nearly doubled from 56 in 2020 to 107 in 2024. The 2024 State of School Feeding worldwide report shed light on [the school meals policy basket](#), which shows how governments are institutionalizing programmes from sustainable financing, nutrition standards and procurement systems to monitoring and accountability mechanisms. This policy momentum demonstrates that school meals are becoming a sustainable feature of national systems.

Country examples:

- Brazil serves over [40 million children](#) with at least [30% of school food](#) sourced from family farms, promoting agroecology, biodiversity, and low-emission supply chains.
- France has committed to ensuring that [at least 50% of food](#) served in school meals comes from sustainable and high-quality sources, with [at least 20% being organic](#).
- Lebanon has committed to developing a new methodology within the framework of the [school health programme](#), to include school meals with other complementary health and environmental activities, including clean water.

- Peru is a strong example of how national school meals policy is being used to strengthen climate-related and disaster preparedness commitments. The government has developed protocols to ensure [continuity of school meals during emergencies](#), targeting high-risk regions, training school administrators, and linking delivery to a financial activation plan—showing how school meals can support broader resilience and emergency response efforts.

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND ANTICIPATORY ACTION

Extreme weather events drive food insecurity and intersect with conflict and economic shocks, creating cascading humanitarian risks. School meals offer a forward-looking solution by ensuring nutrition and stability during crises, especially when integrated into anticipatory action and climate-smart systems.

Country examples:

- In Bangladesh [pioneered anticipatory action linked to school meals](#) in flood-prone regions. Ahead of predictable monsoon flood, early warning systems are used to trigger pre-positioned food supplies and cash transfers to ensure continuity of school feeding. This approach helps maintain nutrition and education access during climate shocks, while reducing negative coping strategies among vulnerable families.
- In Niger, [school meals are integrated into seasonal anticipatory action frameworks](#) to address drought-related food insecurity, using climate forecasts and vulnerability mapping to deliver early interventions, including school-based feeding and nutrition support. These programmes help stabilize household food access and reduce long-term vulnerability.
- The Ethiopian government has [integrated school meals into its Productive Safety Net Programme \(PSNP\)](#), which is designed to reduce vulnerability to climate shocks like drought. In drought-prone regions, school meals are used to stabilize food access and keep children in school during lean seasons. This approach supports both humanitarian response and long-term resilience by linking school feeding to early warning systems and seasonal risk forecasts.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLEAN ENERGY INTEGRATION

- School kitchens are also an entry point for clean cooking solutions – reducing emissions, protecting forests and health and creating safer, more efficient environments for the millions of women and men who prepare school meals daily.

Country Examples:

- Tanzania commits to transition [80% of its population](#) to clean cooking by 2033, accelerating the timeline for public institutions serving over 100 people. At COP28, President Samia Suluhu Hassan [launched the African Women in Clean Cooking Support Programme](#), reinforcing commitment to gender-responsive energy solutions. Supporting these national goals, WFP and [Sustainable Energy for All](#) piloted Electric Pressure Cookers in [50 public primary schools](#) across four regions, while exploring carbon revenues as a co-financing mechanism to scale clean cooking adoption.
- Rwanda has embedded clean cooking into its national school feeding strategy. Following the rapid scale-up of its programme to reach over [4.4 million children](#), Rwanda launched a dedicated

strategy in 2024 that links school meals to climate adaptation, cost-efficiency and improved learning - demonstrating how integrated approaches can deliver results at scale.

Notes:

About the School Meals Coalition

The School Meals Coalition is a network of governments and partners committed to school meals. It drives actions to urgently improve and scale up school meal programmes to ensure that every child can receive a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030.

In just four years, the Coalition has emerged as one of the most successful multisectoral initiatives in recent times. From 46 governments in 2021 to 112 governments today, it has reinforced a growing global commitment and catalyzed government leadership on one common goal: ensuring that every child receives a healthy, nutritious meal in school by 2030. About 150 partner organizations have also joined to support governments in meeting their national commitments.

For more information, visit: <http://schoolmealscoalition.org>

About research on planet-friendly school meals

[The Research Consortium for School Health and Nutrition](#) supports governments in identifying and scaling cost-effective school meals solutions, drawing on a global body of evidence generated through its Global Academy of 1,300+ experts across 124 countries. Through its forthcoming Planetary Health Toolkit, the Consortium is helping countries assess the costs and environmental benefits of adapting menus and cooking methods to improve both health and sustainability outcomes. Read a recent article from Research Consortium experts on [Planet-friendly school meals as opportunities to improve children's health and leverage change in food systems](#).

About funding strategies for sustainable school meals implementation

The Coalition's [Sustainable Financing Initiative](#) plays a pivotal role in helping governments develop long-term, resilient funding strategies for national school meal programmes. By supporting the creation of financing plans, conducting value-for-money analyses, and engaging development banks and international financial institutions, the initiative strengthens countries' capacity to invest in school meals as a strategic tool for human development. Importantly, it also contributes to promoting planet-friendly school meals—including sustainable agriculture, clean cooking solutions, and waste reduction. See their recent report: [Home-Grown School Feeding: Case Studies on Procurement and Financing | School Meals Coalition](#)