

## **A game changing effort for healthy schoolchildren**

### **Regular update note on the coalition discussions and process**

A coalition on school feeding is being formed in 2021 in the context of the Food Systems Summit and key education sector discussions such as the Global Education Forum, Global Education Summit and others. This note is an update of coalition discussions and will be reviewed regularly to keep stakeholders and partners informed on the evolution of the coalition in these early stages. It is also a tool for those interested in joining the coalition to understand what entry points might be possible.

#### **1. The challenge we are responding to**

The number of children living in households that are struggling to put food on the table has doubled during the pandemic. About 38 million children were acutely hungry in 2019. COVID-19 could push a further 36 million into severe hunger, taking the total to 74 million in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

During nationwide lockdowns in some countries, all school feeding programmes were cancelled leaving an estimated 370 million children without free or subsidized school meals.<sup>2</sup> For the most vulnerable children this may be the only source of nourishment; 47 percent of those children are girls. More than 39 billion in-school meals have been missed globally since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closures.<sup>3</sup>

Hunger can affect children in multiple ways. It can result in an impaired immune system, increased morbidity, impaired cognition and malnutrition, which affect education by increasing absenteeism, grade repetition, or drop-outs, ultimately affecting human capital development.<sup>4</sup>

Before the pandemic, school feeding was the largest and most widespread social safety net in the world. Nearly half the world's school children, about 388 million, received a meal at school every day.<sup>5</sup> Since March 2020, there has been a 30 per cent overall reduction in the coverage of

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<sup>1</sup> Food Security Information Network 2020: Global Report on Food Crises. Joint analysis for better decisions. Note: According to a WFP projection, the number of people facing acute food insecurity stands to rise to 265 million in 2020, up by 130 million from the 135 million in 2019, as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19, 28 percent of these people are school children aged 5 – 18.

<sup>2</sup> WFP 2020: Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures. Available at: <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/>

<sup>3</sup> Borkowski, A., Ortiz-Correa, J. S., Bundy, D. A. P., Burbano, C., Hayashi, C., Lloyd-Evans, E., Neitzel, J., and Reuge, N., (2021), COVID-19: Missing More Than a Classroom. The impact of school closures on children's nutrition. Innocenti Working Paper 2021-01. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

<sup>4</sup> Bundy, D. A. P., N. de Silva, S. Horton, D. T. Jamison, and G. C. Patton 2018. Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economies. Washington, DC: World Bank. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO.

<sup>5</sup> WFP. State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020. United Nations World Food Programme; Rome, Italy (forthcoming)

essential nutrition services including school feeding, micronutrient supplementation, and nutrition promotion programmes in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>6</sup>

This has huge implications for students' learning, health and nutrition. COVID-19 learning losses could result in approximately USD 10 trillion of earnings lost for this generation of children, which amounts to one-tenth of global GDP.<sup>7</sup> 24 million additional children and youth could drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone, severely impacting human capital and local economies.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The response – conversations to date

Member states are starting discussions to form a home-grown school feeding coalition as part of the Food Systems Summit process. Convened by Finland, which has committed through its Minister for Development Cooperation to lead the coalition discussions, the following countries met on March 18 to discuss their positions: Finland, Iceland, France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Russia, China, USA, Luxembourg, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Japan, Germany and EU.<sup>9</sup>

There was broad consensus for the creation of a coalition. Aside from France, which had already announced through President Macron their support for the coalition, other countries also committed to engaging in this process. In their interventions, member states started defining the possible objectives and goals of a joint effort. The chair (Finland) will circulate an initial concept note on March 23<sup>rd</sup> and the next meeting of the member state group is scheduled for March 30<sup>th</sup>. Member states also requested a clear roadmap to formalize these discussions as part of the Food Systems Summit and to make this a core initiative of the Summit.<sup>10</sup>

The coalition is expected to grow and include other partners that have already been supporting this agenda: academia, civil society, UN agencies and the private sector. In fact, this work is not starting from scratch. Partners spent most of 2019/2020 discussing and building the infrastructure and agreements that underpin this initiative.

For example, in 2019 UNESCO convened a meeting of UN Agencies which included WFP, FAO, WHO, UNICEF, GPE and the World Bank to discuss school health and nutrition. Since then the

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<sup>6</sup> Borkowski, A., Ortiz-Correa, J. S., Bundy, D. A. P., Burbano, C., Hayashi, C., Lloyd-Evans, E., Neitzel, J., and Reuge, N., (2021), COVID-19: Missing More Than a Classroom. The impact of school closures on children's nutrition. Innocenti Working Paper 2021-01. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank 2020: Simulating the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: A set of global estimates.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations 2020: Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond (August 2020)

<sup>9</sup> These discussions are preliminary. More information about specific country positioning at the Summit will follow in the next weeks and months.

<sup>10</sup> For readers who are familiar with the Food Systems Summit, the terminology used is "game changers". School feeding has already been recognized by several member states as a game changer. The discussions are now about how to move forward with this idea and build a coalition that will propose key solutions or initiatives.

group has worked on advocacy and on better coordination of efforts. UNESCO is also leading the preparation of a joint school health and nutrition report.

In early 2020 WFP and UNICEF announced a partnership on school health and nutrition and they have been working jointly in more than 30 countries supporting governments with integrated SHN packages. In the fall of 2020 and in response to the COVID crisis, the Education Commission led the drafting of the Save our Future White Paper and UNESCO organized the Global Education Meeting, both of which established school health and nutrition as a priority area for recovery efforts.

Recently, an interagency school health and nutrition community of practice has been formalized under the leadership of UN Nutrition, which works on strengthen joint efforts to compile and produce technical guidance for school nutrition.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, discussions on the need to strengthen research efforts for school health and nutrition have evolved since 2019 culminating in the establishment of a Research Consortium. The Consortium will gather academic institutions and experts and will be one of the first key initiatives of the coalition (see below).

### **3. Possible characteristics of the coalition**

As the world seeks to build back from the COVID-19 pandemic, countries and the development community have the opportunity to rethink their current investment in children. The role of school feeding programmes in getting children into school and improving learning has gone beyond proof of principle. There is robust evidence of the benefits of these programmes in terms of health, education, human capital and economic outcomes. The current challenge is on bringing these programs to scale, particularly for the most vulnerable children and to improve the quality and efficiency of programmes everywhere.

Although still to be discussed, the overall objective of the coalition would be to restore and widen access to nutritious and quality school meals for the most vulnerable children in all countries as a game-changing contribution to more sustainable food systems, learning and access to education, better and more diverse and nutritious diets and human capital. The first iteration of concrete objectives and targets will be presented in a discussion paper to member states on the week of March 22.

The coalition will have a “big tent” approach, where all stakeholders interested in this topic or already planning actions can converge. It will build on existing efforts by different partners, avoid duplication and foster complementarities.

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<sup>11</sup> Partners contacted/involved so far (this list is not exhaustive/discussions ongoing): UNICEF, FAO, African Union, UNESCO, IFAD, WHO, World Bank, Global Education Commission, Global Partnership on Education, Education Cannot Wait, London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, Dubai Cares, UN Nutrition, Global Child Nutrition Foundation. Members of the School Health and Nutrition Community of Practice chaired by UN Nutrition. Members of the School Health and Nutrition UN group coordinated by UNESCO.

The coalition will start by fostering initiatives that address the bottlenecks for scale up in low income countries. And its value added will be to support initiatives that model a different, multisectoral way of working. At a minimum, the following sectors will hopefully participate: education, nutrition, health, agriculture and social protection.

The coalition will be built during 2021 in a series of events spanning the year and launched at the Food Systems Summit. It will also feed into other important global conversations of the year including the Global Education Forum and the Nutrition for Growth Summit.

#### **4. Why is this important and why now**

As schools re-open, school health and nutrition interventions are more important than ever because they address child hunger, protect children's nutrition and wellbeing, provide powerful incentives for parents to re-enroll children in school, and increase retention rates, especially among girls. They can help the world get children back to school and recover from the long-term effects of the pandemic.

The restoration and expansion of school feeding programmes is also important for another reason: they can foster healthier, more sustainable food systems. Home-grown school feeding programmes provide children in schools with safe, diverse and nutritious food, sourced locally from smallholders, thereby supporting local agricultural production and processing, and providing stable markets for farmers. The purchase of food locally results in shorter food supply chains and cuts down transportation distance – one big contributor to climate change - avoids unnecessary disposal of food, and can help save biodiversity.<sup>12</sup> “Zero waste” approaches to food preparation encourages communities to reduce the one third of food that is currently wasted, and which represents the largest single avoidable contribution to carbon emissions.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, school feeding programmes have the potential to address the problem of overweight and obesity among school children. By improving the quality of food for children, diversifying their diets and teaching them how to eat better, the programmes can support healthy diets.

School feeding is a game changer. It is a game changer for children (girls in particular) who benefit from being healthier and educated, for farmers who can have access to more stable markets, for women who can establish small businesses providing services to the programmes, and for the community as a whole.

#### **5. Update on existing initiatives as the coalition evolves**

The partners mentioned below are those that have expressed interest in supporting aspects of the coalition and/or are already rolling out initiatives. As the coalition conversations evolve

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission. 2020. Farm to fork strategy: For a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/f2f\\_action-plan\\_2020\\_strategy-info\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> FAO (2013b) from the SoSF is FAO. 2013b. Food Wastage Footprint & Climate Change. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bb144e.pdf>

during 2021, we expect others to come on board as co-leads to support these efforts and perhaps other initiatives to be added to this list.

- 1. Bottleneck: stable funds for implementation. Initiative - Donor working group** (lead: Education Commission). The low fiscal capacity of low-income countries for school feeding is the first and most important challenge to the scaleup and transition to national school feeding programmes. In the context of the Global Education Forum (next meeting April 2021), development partners will be asked to establish a working group to jointly explore transitional and permanent sources of funding for school feeding in low-income countries as a priority. Filling this gap will require an approach that goes beyond the current financing options, for example, an expanded role for emerging donors like the BRICS group of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, new financial instruments such as social investment funds and debt relief mechanisms (including debt swaps) and, perhaps most importantly, stronger recognition of the need for development partners to pool their investments across sectors, in this case including health, education, social protection and agriculture.
- 2. Bottleneck: stronger mission-critical research. Initiative - Research Consortium** (lead: London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene). A research consortium will be established and managed by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine to coordinate the efforts of academia, think tanks and research partners. The Consortium will be launched on May 27<sup>th</sup> in London. A 10-year research agenda will be established to build evidence on the impacts of school feeding at large and specifically focus on the learning crisis expected as a result of the COVID-19 crisis with the explicit goal of contributing to high quality programming and better decision making by government leaders. Communities of practice will be established around research topics.
- 3. Bottleneck: stronger systems and policies. Initiative – Global Action Network on School Meals** (lead: Germany). A conference in June 2021 called “Policies against Hunger” will tackle the core question of how sustainable and healthy school nutrition can be ensured. The conference will bring political and administrative representatives as well as civil society and private stakeholders alongside international organisations and science to the table to exchanges views on sustainable and healthy school nutrition. The outcomes of the conference are to provide a key input for the current UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025) and the United Nations *Food Systems Summit* (FSS) planned for the end of 2021.
- 4. Bottleneck: stronger global standards and guidance development. Initiative – community of practice** (lead: UN Nutrition) UN agencies are supporting these efforts by developing and disseminating evidence-based policy and programme standards and guidance to strengthen school feeding programmes and the linkages between education, agriculture, health and nutrition and support integrated programmes and policies. Discussions in 2021 will determine

the connection of these efforts with the coalition and the Food Systems Summit in consultation with the UN Nutrition secretariat. Agencies currently coordinating action include: UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO, WFP, WHO, World Bank and GPE.

## **6. The High-level Steering Committee**

A Steering Committee is being established under the leadership of Finland's Minister for Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade, to lead advocacy efforts and ensure school feeding is positioned as a game changing intervention in global discussions. Members will be leaders from the global north and south that are already committed to the issue who will jointly advocate in relevant development and economic global and regional fora. The group will include influential figures in education, health and nutrition, high level representatives of development partners and donors.

## **7. Secretariat**

A Secretariat for this effort is being established to convene and connect the different areas of work and initiatives mentioned above, secure alignment, increase synergies and step up effective school feeding programmes, particularly home-grown school feeding.

Hosted by WFP and supported initially by two or three key founding partners, the Secretariat will provide the following support to the coalition:

- Invite and mobilize partners to join the coalition. The intention is initially to connect various activities that are already ongoing in one coherent effort, aligned to the same goals. Partners that have already been working on these issues and new stakeholders will be invited to participate and their existing initiatives will be included in the overall activities of the coalition.
- Inform the partners of what each other is doing, find synergies and promote connections between initiatives. Link initiatives to global dialogues to ensure the work of the coalition feeds into global sectoral conversations.
- Report on global and regional achievement of the goal and targets of the coalition through a global data base, establishment of key indicators and a biannual publication "State of School Feeding Worldwide", which will be considered the global benchmarking exercise.
- Establish an information hub through a web portal that can house evidence, publications, information on key events and achievements of the coalition.
- Amplify messages and activities of the partners through a communication strategy and social media channels.