



Sustainable Financing Initiative (SFI) for School Health and Nutrition

Concept Note

Context

The [School Meals Coalition \(SMC\)](#) was launched at the United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit in September 2021 under the leadership of Finland and France. More than 77 countries from the global North and South together with 87 partners (including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, think tanks and academic partners) came together to improve and restore school meals programs as a transformational platform for food and education systems.

School feeding programs are an established part of public policies in a growing number of countries, not only wealthy ones. Research findings have confirmed the wide-ranging and mutually reinforcing benefits generated by such programs across several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including education, nutrition, child health, social protection, poverty reduction and, through home grown school feeding, rural livelihoods. Yet, despite school meals programs being an investment generating high social and economic returns, they have a limited reach where they are most needed.

The fiscal space available to governments in many low- or low- and -middle income countries (LICs and LMICs) is shrinking in the face of unsustainable debt and reduced economic growth projections. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has triggered a surge in energy and food price inflation and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that economic growth over the next five years will be the weakest in three decades. This could simultaneously increase household poverty and child malnutrition while adding to the costs of already under-funded school meal programs.

As financial pressures on governments mount, there is a danger that the current benefits of school feeding will be eroded, and the potential benefits of program expansion left untapped. That would represent a major setback for the SDGs. An expansion of school feeding programs could help accelerate progress in learning and provide safety nets for vulnerable children. Moreover, school feeding represents an important link in the food system chain. There is therefore now an urgent need to develop global as well as country specific strategies that lead to a sustainable resource base for present, growing and improving school meals programs, in particular in the LICs and LMICs where these programs are most needed.

The Sustainable Financing Initiative (SFI) for School Health and Nutrition

The [Sustainable Financing Initiative \(SFI\) for School Health and Nutrition](#) is one of the five initiatives under the SMC. **The goal of the SFI is to work with governments and donors to help countries identify multi-year financing opportunities for school feeding programs with a particular focus on low- and lower-middle-income countries.** Our aim is that by 2030, school health and nutrition programs are considered as key transforming platforms and receive more domestic and international financing.

The SFI has the following three global objectives which will be carried out over the next three years along the three action lines of analyze, act, and amplify:

- 1. ANALYZE: Undertake research and analysis of global and national financing for school meals programs and develop options for long-term financing in low- and lower-middle-income countries.** This will include improving the understanding of current levels of financing provision, from domestic and international sources, and the mechanisms – including innovative financing and cross-sectoral financing mechanisms - that may be available to governments to mobilize new and additional resources to expand and accelerate school feeding. This will better inform policy dialogue, decision-making, and advocacy.
- 2. ACT: Work with country governments to support the development of national strategies for financing high-quality school meal programs.** This will include analyzing the explicit and hidden costs of high quality programs, current domestic budgets, funding gaps, potential efficiency gains to reduce costs without reducing quality or coverage, and developing strategies for financing school meals programs from 1) national sources (governments, private sector, communities, as relevant), 2) from external sources (quantifying the support required from external partners until countries are expected to be able to fully sustain their school meals program by themselves), and 3) cross-sectoral financing opportunities.
- 3. AMPLIFY: Communicate and disseminate the SFI’s research and country work and work with key actors** through the Steering Committee, working groups, and SMC to influence country governments and international actors to invest more in sustainable financing of school meals programs.

How the SFI works

As agreed by SMC member states, the [Education Commission](#) led the SFI with a small team responsible for delivering the objectives and activities until July 2023, when the team, agenda, and mission of the Education Commission transitioned to the Learning Generation Initiative now hosted by [Education Development Center](#), led by Liesbet Steer.

The SFI is guided by a high-level Steering Committee, chaired by Christina Duarte, Special Adviser for Africa for the UN Secretary General, providing strategic guidance to each of the objectives. The SFI launched with a virtual event on July 19, 2022 (watch the launch [here](#).)

The SFI works for the priorities and needs of governments of the SMC. As such, SFI works closely with the SMC, WFP, funders and country governments to establish country partnerships. The SFI works closely with the other SMC initiatives, specifically the Research Consortium and the Data and Monitoring Initiative to ensure coherence and complementarity. The SFI maintains a strong link to the Global Education Forum.

Achievements to date

The initial phase of the SFI (2021-2022) included scoping research on national financing, the role of donors, international financing, and the private sector. Most recently, the SFI produced the research paper [“School Meals Programmes and the Education Crisis: A Financial Landscape Analysis”](#) and accompanying

[Policy Brief](#). These papers laid out the current state of domestic and international investments in school feeding programs, existing challenges, and possible policy solutions to sustainable financing.

Seven country case-studies (Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Guatemala, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania) explored a diversity of contexts allowing for a greater understanding of financing patterns and challenges under sustainability lens. Key findings included: strong government commitment and seeking to increase self-reliance, partial coverage of children, diversity of financing options (general revenues (Rwanda, Bangladesh), SDG bonds (Benin), earmarked taxes (Bolivia)).

A series of promising financing options were developed for the [Investment Case for School Health and Nutrition paper](#), a memo prepared jointly with the SMC's Research Consortium for SHN to inform discussions of the [Global Education Forum](#) in April 2022 and fed in the preparation work for the UN [Transforming Education Summit](#) in September 2022.

In July 2023, the SFI published "[School meal programmes: A missing link in food systems reform](#)" to influence the Food Systems Summit Stock Take event and position school meals as a unique opportunity to improve food systems, climate change and education outcomes.

Initial finance strategy support has been provided to Rwanda in partnership with WFP and SFI has developed a country finance strategy methodology and financing tool ready to use with other country governments with which discussions are well underway.

The SFI in 2023-2025

Over the next three years, the SFI work will focus on:

- Working with country governments to develop credible medium- to long-term financing strategies for school feeding undertaking fiscal space and costing analysis and exploring different funding options, drawing on the research and tools developed.
- Setting out a global agenda and options for school feeding financing based on an analysis of the state of financing, including more in-depth research on donor funding, domestic financing strategies, innovative financing and cross-sectoral financing opportunities.
- A deep dive into school meals financing as means to encourage local sustainable financing and Home-Grown School Feeding.

The SFI is currently funded by the World Food Programme, the Rockefeller Foundation, and BMZ-Germany. We are also looking for **funding partners** to support the SFI over the next 3 years for the work outlined above. Working together we will ensure robust research and evidence, accelerated progress at country level, and influencing at the global level. We are also looking for **strategic partners** to work with us on research, tools and analysis; informing policy and practice; accelerating the implementation of national policy commitments; and catalyzing global action.

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