

The Role of School Meal Service Programs

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Summary One in every two school children, or 388 million children from all income levels, receives school meals every day in at least 161 countries. However, school meals are not uniform. It means the contents, timing, and method of offering are different across countries. School feeding has consequences for at least four different sectors. First is social protection as a social safety net to benefit the most vulnerable. Second is education. Sometimes school meals motivate parents to allow their children to attend school, especially in developing countries. Moreover, children who are fed well can concentrate on their studies. Third is agriculture. It promotes sustainable local markets by using the ingredients from the local area in school meals. Finally, school meals contribute toward the health and nutrition of present and prospective children. Nowadays, approximately 80% of countries have a school feeding policy. However, feeding policies differ across countries in respect of the government organization in charge and the order of priority in that country. This symposium provides background information, current situation, and quality improvement of school meals in four Asian countries and the US. We hope that this symposium is useful to learn about the current situation of school meals in various countries and to acquire ideas to improve them in your own country and the world.

Key Words school meal, school lunch, food service, children

One in every two school children, or 388 million children from all income levels, receives school meals every day in at least 161 countries, according to World Food Programme (WFP), 2020 (1).

What is important about school meals? The four important factors are as follows. First is social protection as a social safety net to benefit the most vulnerable. Second is education. Sometimes school meals motivate parents to allow their children to attend school, especially in developing countries. When the household budget is severely restricted, it is difficult to prepare meals for children; thus, school meals are useful. Moreover, children who are fed well can concentrate on their studies. Thus, they also lead toward achieving prospective career goals. Third is agriculture. They promote sustainable local markets by using the ingredients from the local area. Finally, school meals contribute toward the health and nutrition of present and prospective children. Thus, school feeding is the largest and most widespread social safety net in the world (1).

Let us consider school meals specifically. Nowadays, approximately 80% of countries have a school feeding policy (1). However, school feeding policies differ across countries, in respect of the government organization in charge and the order of priority in that country. For example, the government organization in charge in Japan is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. In Korea it is controlled by the Ministry of Education, whereas in the US and Sweden, it is controlled by the Department of Agriculture and

the National Food Agency, respectively. The importance of school meals has already been established; however, government organizations in charge focus on the aims of school meals. Some countries place maximum priority on eating habits while others emphasize nutritious food (2).

The kind of school meals offered to children differ across countries. Some countries have nutrient-based standards for school lunches and they depend on the national dietary reference intakes. For example, regarding calcium, the nutrient-based standard for school lunches in Japan is 50% of the Recommended Dietary Allowances; in Korea, it is one-third of the Estimated Average Requirement and in Taiwan, one-third of the Adequate Intake (3).

The timing of offering school meals also differs across countries. Some countries offer school meals in the morning, and others at lunch, while some offer them at both times (4). The method of serving school meals also differs. For example, children serve meals to classmates in Japan, whereas in some countries, school meals are served by the cook at the school cafeteria (2). School meals are not uniform owing to different school feeding policies, *national culture, acquisition of food, and socioeconomic situations*.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an end to the global growth in school feeding programmes. At the height of the pandemic in April 2020, 199 countries had closed their schools and 370 million children were suddenly deprived of what for many was their main meal of the day (1). Thus, it is necessary to protect school meals as a social safety net even in an emer-

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gency such as the pandemic.

This symposium provides background information, the current situation, and quality improvement of school meals in Vietnam, Malaysia, Korea, Japan and the US. We hope that this symposium gives you an opportunity to learn about the current situation of school meals in these countries and to acquire ideas to improve the school meals in your own country and the world.

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