



## Background paper WG 1

### Requirements for school nutrition policy, legal frameworks, quality standards, and infrastructure

#### Context:

There are very different approaches to organising, funding, and putting school nutrition in practice in individual low-, middle- and high-income countries around the world.

An evaluation of international school nutrition programmes has shown that change has been afoot over the past years. The trend is shifting away from school catering providing a meal towards sustainable and healthy school nutrition involving also the nutrition environment. This encompasses a comprehensive approach to the legal framework, local and regional production and procurement systems, health and hygiene aspects, as well as educational programmes. Therefore, healthy and sustainable school nutrition not only comprises school catering including the sensitisation of the entire reference system for sustainable food and nutrition, but also corresponding educational measures in schools, supplemented by the hands-on work done in school gardens and canteens, for example. Effective nutrition by the school system is only possible if all these factors are taken into account and the entire multi-stakeholder background is involved. There is no one-size-fits-all solution<sup>1</sup> for sustainable school nutrition. Instead, it is necessary to adapt school nutrition systems to the country-specific framework and to act in concert at global level.

This results in numerous requirements for school nutrition. A school nutrition strategy may then be developed according to these and depending on the country setting, which may include corresponding quality standards and their mandatory implementation.

In spite of different levels of income, a number of countries face similar challenges in the introduction of sustainable school nutrition: a weak policy framework, limited coverage of school nutrition schemes, a lack of mandatory dietary guidelines, little reference to nutrition and environmental education, insufficient coordination between different sectors, or deficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The impacts of school nutrition systems in place are largely unknown and their systematic assessment is conducted in a very different manner in each country.

Under the leadership of the UNESCO, *Stepping-up effective school health and nutrition: A partnership for healthy learners and brighter futures*<sup>2</sup> has just been launched. In cooperation with the relevant UN agencies, the partnership focuses in particular on sustainable school nutrition and its role in food systems. It

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<sup>1</sup> [www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/06/09/no-one-size-fits-all-solution-to-sustainable-school-feeding-programs](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/06/09/no-one-size-fits-all-solution-to-sustainable-school-feeding-programs)

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO et al. (2020): *Stepping up effective school health and nutrition. A partnership for healthy learners and brighter futures.*



internationally advocates an integrated and comprehensive strategy for making health and nutrition services in schools more sustainable while embedding these services in existing support structures.

The potential of sustainable school nutrition, however, remains largely unused. It can therefore not yet contribute to combatting malnutrition and to attaining the SDGs.<sup>3</sup>

Working Group 1 will focus on: A discussion on the necessary requirements (at the political, institutional, technical, and staff level) and adequate quality standards to enable and promote sustainable school nutrition. What do stakeholders (in politics, municipalities, parent committees etc.) have to do to meet these demands? What resources must jointly be provided to ensure sustainable school nutrition?

### Key topics

#### **I. Requirements for healthy and sustainable school nutrition – what is the status quo?**

The legal requirements in place for the school sector and existing quality guidelines for the consumer and food sectors provide the individual framework for developing a sustainable school nutrition policy in each country. This also includes marshalling different state, private sector and civil society stakeholders in order to make the necessary equipment and facilities, funding, and staff available for schools to achieve healthier school nutrition. An integrated, multisectoral approach to implementing school nutrition policies can create sensible linkages among the existing potential in the respective country settings.

Over the past few years, the goal has been to more strongly integrate the local and regional agricultural sectors in providing healthy school nutrition in order to at the same time promote local sources of income and make use of local know-how on production processes as well as food and nutrition. International organisations are increasingly lending their support to nutrition-sensitive agriculture in numerous low- and middle-income countries, which means that local family-run enterprises produce nutritious foodstuffs to be specifically used in school meals (***Home-grown School Feeding Approach***)<sup>4</sup> (see WG 3).

Adequate food procurement, meal planning and preparation depend on the respective capacity development among all relevant stakeholders involved in sustainable school nutrition. One aspect of a sustainability strategy in the framework of school policy requirements should be the strengthening of stakeholders within the school food system.

School nutrition should be established as a comprehensive system and consumption patterns be linked with health and hygiene issues as well as local production systems. At the same time, the legal framework should

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<sup>3</sup> FAO (2019): Nutrition guidelines and standards for school meals. A report from 33 low- and middle-income countries.

<sup>4</sup> WFP, FAO, GCNF, PCD, NEPAD – Resource framework on home-grown school meals, 2016



be elaborated. This is already being done in a couple of countries, such as Brazil and Ghana. These learning experiences can be analysed and disseminated.

## **II. Quality standards for school nutrition – which standards have proven useful and which players have been instrumental?**

National regulations on food labelling, marketing bans and restrictions on the selling of certain foods and drinks in schools have been put in place ever more frequently. In many countries, especially in Asia, the marketing of industrially manufactured products, including school snacks, in schools is increasing, particularly in urban areas. This can be at the expense of local food production, which had provided the school meals so far, and may also disregard existing dietary recommendations. The means of production, the quality and the composition of foods used in school meals differ significantly and are sometimes based on the financial considerations of those in charge of school catering (economic viability) or are subject to the influence of the food industry (processing, advertising). Cultural aspects can also shape the consumer behaviour within a society. Children also tend to prefer less “healthy” and strongly sweetened food, which can easily lead to overnutrition. It is necessary to observe these tendencies.

Dietary guidelines as well as national recommendations for an adequate diet are in place in nearly all countries and are frequently elaborated and disseminated by public quality centres or institutes specifically set up for this purpose (e.g. the German Nutrition Society (DGE) in Germany).<sup>5</sup> In most cases, however, these quality standards are recommendations rather than mandatory requirements.

International foundations often support school nutrition programmes with their qualified representatives from academia and public institutions, and interlink education, nutrition, health, and agriculture (e.g. *GCNF Global Child Nutrition Foundation*). They are in charge of crucial tasks such as monitoring the impacts of integrated approaches or compliance with quality standards.

Partnerships and multisectoral policies for better school nutrition are key challenges in the political realignment of all sectors and stakeholders involved. There should be an exchange on framework conditions and global quality standards for proper school nutrition. There could be a joint effort to define the different stakeholders playing a role in the school environment and their respective tasks.

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<sup>5</sup>DGE (2020) Quality Standard for School Meals



### **Guiding questions:**

1. What systems, including the food system, are particularly relevant to enable schools as a (sustainable) system for nutrition? Try to include political, staff, institutional and technical aspects.
2. What supporting evidence and approaches and practices you are aware of in low-, middle- and high-income countries to improve the school food environment for sustainable school nutrition? What lessons can be learned? What gaps have you seen that need to be addressed for success?
3. What partnerships between producers, the private sector as well as public and civil society organisations are needed in order to make the entire environment (following a systems approach) of school nutrition sustainable?

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