



Background paper WG 4

Securing school nutrition in crisis situations, such as pandemics

Context

A growing number of people worldwide is affected by immediate and long-term crisis situations. Natural disasters, climate change, political events, economic shocks, persistently chronic poverty, as well as pandemics and other health and food crises also have a severe impact on school children.

According to UNICEF¹, nearly 1.5 billion children – hence more than 90 % of learners worldwide – were affected by closed schools during the COVID-19 pandemic globally. In mid-January 2021, almost 214 million children worldwide were still out of school as schools were closed due to the pandemic according to UNESCO². FAO reports³ that 85 million children in Latin America and the Caribbean currently benefit from school feeding programmes. They constitute one of the most reliable daily sources of food for about 10 million children. WFP states that millions of children worldwide no longer receive school meals due to school closures as a response to coronavirus, although they often depend on them for their daily diet.

School feeding programmes are the key to ensuring school children's rights to adequate, safe and nutritious food without discrimination⁴. It is one of the key tasks in crisis management in the education sector to be able to ensure the continuity of school nutrition programmes, including school feeding, in the context of pandemics insofar as possible as well as to make re-opening schools after closures a priority⁵.

This working group will focus on the experience gained by different stakeholders in low-, middle- and high-income countries pertaining to (i) the impact of crisis situations on school nutrition, including the availability of healthy and sustainably produced school meals and/or snacks, and (ii) measures to cushion the negative effects of such crises. The focus will be on the crisis situation which is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as this is a burning issue at the moment.

¹ www.unicef.org/documents/mitigating-effects-covid-19-pandemic-food-and-nutrition-school-children

² <https://www.globalpartnership.org/results/education-data-highlights>

³ www.fao.org/americas/noticias/ver/en/c/1266855/

⁴ www.unicef.org/media/68291/file/Mitigating-the-Effects-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-on-Food-and-Nutrition-of-school-children.pdf (S. 1)

⁵ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348>



Key topics

I. Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school nutrition

Aside from the direct impacts of crises on, for instance, health in the case of epidemics or pandemics, indirect implications are frequently particularly detrimental. This is the case whenever schools must be closed and hence school feeding is suspended. This is linked to severely negative consequences for school children. In the worst-case scenario, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, both direct and indirect factors occur, which results in multiple repercussions for school children due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Implications of school closures

The consequences of the suspension of **school feeding** programmes in crises for children and their families are catastrophic. Many of the children affected do not have access to a sufficient amount of food at home. Without school meals, they do not get enough vital vitamins and nutrients. In poor families, the value of one school meal for one of the family's children comes to roughly 10 percent of the monthly household income of these families. The suspension of school catering hence also causes an income loss⁶. Without the school meals that many of these children usually benefit from, they go to bed hungry and their nutritional status deteriorates⁷.

Without **nutrition education**, children lack important knowledge and skills necessary to be able to ensure a healthy diet for themselves in the long run.

- Implications without school closures

Even if school closures are not necessary, certain adaptation measures must be taken in response to crises. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this particularly concerns hygiene measures and distancing rules. For the specific case of school meals, this, for instance, means that children can no longer share food and drinks as well as crockery and cutlery among them⁸.

Economic crises – in general and as a consequence of other crises such as pandemics – can also make adjustments to the quantity and/or quality of school meals necessary, which can in turn be at the expense of the balanced diet of school children. Political or security crises may, for example, lead to

⁶ <https://de.wfp.org/school-meals>

⁷ www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-cannot-afford-another-year-school-disruption

⁸ See p. 10 in: www.who.int/publications/m/item/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools



situations where school feeding must be suspended due to the elevated risk of looting, while classes, including on nutrition education, can possibly continue.

Depending on the context of the crisis, a comprehensive analysis of the situation of school feeding may be necessary in order to be able to take appropriate mitigation measures.

II. Measures to ensure the continued operation of school catering in crisis situations

There are numerous examples of different stakeholders adapting their school nutrition programmes to different crisis situations in order to ensure that the children affected and their families can benefit from the measures despite the crisis.

If schools must be closed, different stakeholders, such as governments, UN agencies, and other partners, cooperate to ensure that children and also their families continue to receive the support in food they urgently need during the crisis. This includes for example take-home rations, food delivered to their homes, as well as cash or meal vouchers⁹. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to ensure that these measures comply with the required hygiene and distancing rules.

Countries that have kept their schools open must give highest priority to the compliance with hygiene and distancing rules as well as quality standards. Stakeholders must ensure that distance measures are enforced in order to reduce the risk of infection. In addition, there is also a continued effort to improve the access to water and sanitation¹⁰.

FAO¹¹ also proposes a number of possible measures:

- Increasing income transfers of social protection programmes (if they are in place) by an amount corresponding to the cost of food rations delivered by school feeding programs;
- Redistribution of food from school feeding programs through donations to entities responsible for providing food assistance (such as food banks, social organizations, non-governmental organizations, churches) during the emergency response phase, under the strict monitoring of security protocols to prevent the spread of the virus;
- Use of digital tools to improve communication regarding access points for food deliveries, distribution times, and recommendations for the proper use of food, as well as measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19;

⁹<https://de.wfp.org/school-meals> and <https://www.wfp.org/stories/school-feeding-home>

¹⁰<https://de.wfp.org/school-meals> and <https://www.wfp.org/stories/school-feeding-home>

¹¹ <http://www.fao.org/americas/noticias/ver/en/c/1266855/>



First learning experiences and recommendations from the daily work within school nutrition programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic¹² have shown that a high degree of flexibility is necessary so that all stakeholders can respond swiftly and appropriately to the constantly changing conditions and measures by adopting their procurement and supply mechanisms accordingly. One of the key priorities must be to ensure that the measures taken with regard to school nutrition in a crisis situation do not in turn pose an additional risk to all those involved.

Guiding questions:

1. What guidelines for school nutrition in crisis situations are in place at the international and national levels as well as within individual organisations? How do they relate to each other? Are they adequate and/or have any gaps found been addressed?
2. What practical experiences have been gained in low-, middle- and high-income countries relating to school nutrition programmes in crisis situations? What were the greatest challenges and how were they tackled? To what extent do experiences made with school nutrition programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic differ from experience gained with other types of crises?
3. In planning for future responses, what type of cooperation is necessary to make measures on school nutrition in crisis situations as effective as possible? How can school nutrition be maintained cost-effectively in the absence of a school system? What are the implications of closures of schools and reopening of schools?

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¹² <https://socialprotection.org/discover/blog/managing-continuity-and-preparedness-school-feeding-programmes-under-covid-19-and-ssc>



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