



Background paper WG 3

Development of sustainable school food systems

Context

Both in low- and middle-income countries and in countries with higher incomes, school feeding sets the organisational and institutional framework for promoting a healthy and sustainable diet for children attending these institutions.

At international level and in many countries, there is a broad consensus now that the procurement of food and the preparation of meals and snacks in school canteens should be designed in such a way that health and sustainability criteria are given the most extensive consideration possible throughout the entire food system – from farm to fork. Healthy and sustainable school feeding therefore goes beyond the supply chains and value chains of food or school meals. It also includes the selection, preparation and consumption of highly nutritious and safe foods by all those involved in school feeding.

Although a set of universally accepted criteria for healthy and sustainable school feeding is not yet in place and there is a great variety of fundamentally different systems worldwide, there is an increasing number of international and national policies, guiding frameworks, and practical examples of healthy and sustainable food systems in schools. Reducing the consumption of sugar, fat and salt, which is too high in many countries, and increasing the share of nutritious food that is produced locally or regionally by small-scale farmers as close to nature as possible, is gaining acceptance for school children's diets. However, there are still many challenges to overcome in order to turn this into a comprehensive global movement and make such a diet the easy choice. In the reference system of school feeding, i.e. in food production, processing, marketing, preparation, procurement and consumption, not all stakeholders have yet developed a common understanding of how to ensure healthy and sustainable school feeding.

This working group will focus on sustainable supply and value chains as well as the reference systems that are necessary for healthy and sustainable meals in schools.

Key topics

I. Promoting sustainable supply and value chains for healthy school meals

Whether school meals are prepared on site or bought as (semi-)prepared meals and/or snacks, the supply and value chains of school feeding provide a good opportunity to contribute to objectives



relating to food and nutrition, health, and sustainability. School feeding that dovetails the schools' food demand with local production within communities can create economic opportunities for local farmers and food processing operators. This is done, for instance, within the scope of the *home-grown school feeding* (HGSF) approach. This can then improve both the development of the local economy and, at the same time, the availability of safe and healthy food for school children.

Policies for procuring and providing healthy food in schools must create the legal preconditions and determine, together with all reference groups in this food system – ideally in a participatory way –, the (i) food and nutrition related criteria and (ii) sustainability criteria in order to increase the availability of food and drinks in schools that promote a healthy and sustainable diet. In addition to that, the availability of food and drinks that contribute to an unhealthy and unsustainable diet should be restricted or prohibited. However, such criteria will only be effective if they are specific and mandatory. This applies to all public sector food purchases and food that is served or sold in public schools; for private actors, these criteria could be seen as guidelines.

Although each country tailors its specific nutrition and sustainability criteria to its own context and population, they should include a set of minimum core principles of a healthy and sustainable diet for school children. International and national organisations in many countries are working on developing such criteria and principles and embedding them in the school food system with all stakeholders. All actors of the respective supply and value chains are called upon to rigorously implement the specified criteria. To this end, awareness of the value and necessity must be developed and sufficient resources from various sources must be made available.

II. Promoting the reference system for healthy and sustainable school feeding

Healthy and sustainable school feeding can only be successful if the entire reference system supporting these institutions works in concert and in a dedicated manner to realise it. Understanding the value and necessity of sustainably produced, year-round and permanently available and accessible, culturally accepted and highly nutritious and safe food with local or regional value creation is essential for balanced school feeding. This is how – induced by the schools' demand for healthy and sustainably produced and prepared food – not only school children but also producers and food processors on the ground and in the region can profit and improve their living conditions.

This can and must be supported through relevant communication on food and nutrition with producers, marketing companies, processors, procurement companies, and canteen operators in cooperation with the caregivers, teachers, and parents. To this end, it is important, if possible, to



bring all parties of the reference system involved together to agree on (i) the principles and standards, (ii) the specific objectives, and (iii) the practical approach in procuring healthy and sustainable school meals and snacks. Each and every one must understand and responsibly assume their specific role and task in this food system if permanent improvements are to be achieved. Only in this way can the goal of healthy and sustainable school nutrition become reality.

Guiding questions:

1. What positive examples of sustainable supply and value chains and children's sustainable consumption exist in school feeding? Which criteria for sustainability have been defined? How binding are they or should they be, and how can they be made obligatory?
2. What hurdles had to be overcome? What are important factors for success or what have they been?
3. Who needs to be involved in order to achieve healthy and sustainable school meals for all children at all times? When and how must this reference system be involved?

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