

WEBINAR SUMMARY

# Managing continuity and preparedness of school feeding programmes under COVID-19 and the SSC role





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On 21 July 2021, The International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) and the World Food Programme (WFP) brought together experts to discuss the links between school meals and South-South cooperation during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Experts from the WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger Brazil, the WFP School-Based Programmes Services and the UNOSSC introduced practical organizational tools and perspectives. WFP experts presented how the organization is providing South-South technical assistance during the coronavirus crisis. UNOSSC's director brought the perspective on how South-South cooperation can contribute to food and nutrition security response and preparedness at a global scale.

The WFP Country Office in Mozambique and senior managers from the Ministries of Education of Colombia and Cambodia brought their concrete experiences and daily operational know-how. They illustrated what has worked and how for adapting and making their national school feeding programmes more resilient, adaptive and responsive. Representatives from the countries also debated how South-South cooperation can contribute to revamp affected programmes.

The recording of the webinar is available [here](#) and the presentations can be found [here](#).



# 1 How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted the lives of school-aged children?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on school children. In the peak of the crisis at the global level, between April and May 2020, almost 1.6 billion school-aged young people were affected by school closures, which were in force in 190 countries. This has had critical implications for students' learning, health and nutrition. Nearly 370 million schoolchildren were missing out on school meals on which they depend.

Missing school meals means missing a lifeline to health and nutrition for many children in poor countries. For many, especially for the 13 million children who receive school feeding from WFP daily, this meal is often the only one they get during the day. Lack of nutritious food may trigger lower responses from the immune system, making the children more vulnerable to diseases brought by the COVID-19 virus. WFP works with governments and partners, like UNOSSC, to ensure that school children and their families continue to receive support that addresses their food and nutritional requirements and to make available and exchange the knowledge necessary for the local to implement and adapt tested ideas.

While governments prepare their emergency responses or they plan how to reopen schools, WFP can support national education and school-based systems that assist children and their families through school feeding and health programmes. In Colombia, for example, the national government has been acting fast on the national school feeding programme. In the border zone with Venezuela, where many refugees live, WFP and the Government, in coordination with local school authorities, are distributing take-home rations to school children and their parents. In Mozambique, already affected by cyclones in 2019, WFP is also providing take-home rations to school children, in lieu of hot meals. In Cambodia, WFP and the Government also provide take-home ration distribution to more than 81,100 schoolchildren and 1,600 school cooks.



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## 2 School closures and school feeding adaptation

According to **WFP's global monitoring**, in response to the massive emergency caused by COVID-19, 71 countries around the world found alternatives to keep supporting their children with school feeding. High income and upper-middle income countries implemented modalities such as food stamp assistance, delivery of food parcels, supermarket vouchers and cash transfers. This is the case for the US, UK and many European countries. Middle income and lower-middle income nations have prioritized school feeding continuation, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Take-home rations were the main modality used here, which means that food which children would otherwise consume in schools was now delivered to their families. Cash transfers and food distribution at drop off points were other widespread modalities.

For WFP, two main types of actions were taken to support countries in responding to the crisis. On the operational side, WFP has supported country governments (on delivery and resource mobilization) to put in place alternatives and provide meals to school-aged children during the pandemic. WFP and UNICEF have also joined forces to lead a coalition of partners and reach 10 million of the most vulnerable children in the world with integrated packages of School Health and Nutrition.

On the corporate side, the UN system mobilized to produce a series of guidance pieces to support governments in finding alternatives for school feeding implementation. WFP, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR and the World Bank have recently launched a **Framework for the safe reopening of schools**. WFP has also contributed to the World Bank publication **The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to education and policy responses**, and to 2 policy briefs led by the UN Secretary General's office on **the impact of COVID-19 on children** and **on food security and nutrition**. These are calls to action to support schoolchildren, who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.



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# Mozambique

With recurring droughts and floods affecting food production, internal conflict and displacement in the north, as well as challenges to humanitarian assistance provision, **Mozambique** is considered a hot spot for Food Insecurity. This situation was intensified in 2019, when the country was hit by two deadly cyclones (Idai and Keneth) leaving numerous losses and schools closed due to the disasters' damage. In terms of school feeding provision, there are important infrastructure challenges to be faced — a very low number of primary schools have access to clean water and bathroom facilities.

**Mozambique** has been implementing school feeding in partnership with WFP since 1977. The National School Feeding Programme (PRONAE) was adopted in 2013 as the result of South-South Cooperation undertaken with Brazil. After a piloting phase that tested local purchase modalities, the gradual handover of PRONAE's operations from WFP to the Ministry of Education Directorate for School Health and Nutrition was foreseen.



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After the surge of COVID-19, in March 2020, the Government of Mozambique closed all schools in the country and school feeding interventions were halted. WFP and the government adapted to this scenario by using THR to maintain food provision to schoolchildren. This is a modality that had already been successfully implemented after cyclone Idai, supporting 90 thousand children in 81 affected schools, further leading to a 25% increase in enrolment rates.

For the COVID crisis, THR was implemented in partnership with local authorities in the province of Tete, supporting 41 thousand children in 104 schools. Using the guidelines and frameworks developed by WFP and partners, food distribution was planned and adapted to avoid crowding and maintain appropriate hygiene measures.

In the pre-distribution phase, food was repackaged by school staff and local retailers and lists of beneficiaries were revised. In planning the content of the baskets, WFP and the government adjusted food quantities to attend to the needs of students' families.

On the distribution day, hygiene and social distancing measures applied. Families received vouchers with time slots for food pick-up, markings on the floor were made for caregivers to stand on, buckets and soap were available for handwashing. The distribution moment was also seized to sensitize communities on COVID-19 prevention: printed banners were put up and flyers were distributed to caregivers.

The adaptations successfully applied to school feeding during the COVID-19 pandemic will raise important policy-level discussions and implications for PRONAE in future years. For the short-term, WFP Mozambique highlights not only THR's benefits to crises contexts, but also how students covered by PRONAE could benefit from an expansion of this model.



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# Colombia

**Colombia** is a country with more than 100 thousand municipalities, out of which 40% are in dispersed rural areas — where one in every three students covered by the National School Feeding Programme (PAE) lives. School feeding operations are decentralized, with 96 private certified entities managing and implementing the national programme.

After COVID-19 hit, the government adapted to maintain all social programmes on food security operational. For PAE, the government's first important challenge was to adjust the school feeding legal framework, which happened very quickly. The first COVID-19 case was identified in **Colombia** on March 7th and the country's schools closed on the 16th. With food supplies that could not be lost stored in schools, the government signed a decree on March 17th changing PAE's rules to allow for food distribution to schoolchildren's caregivers until the end of the crisis.



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The entities implementing PAE provided different alternatives to guarantee school feeding continuity and adaptation. The majority (88%) opted for THRs: food baskets equivalent to one meal per day for a month. Industrialized Rations — with food ready for consumption, delivered individually in primary packaging — were chosen by 21% of implementers. Finally, 5% opted for redeemable vouchers, a more urban alternative.

Baskets were delivered weekly, biweekly or preferably on a monthly basis. Strict scheduling of deliveries was implemented to avoid crowds, with quality and safety standards, as well as constant supervision in place. With each basket delivered, healthy eating recommendations, menu proposals and instructions for proper hygiene and food preparation at home were delivered. Additional costs per student applied, as PAE's coverage was also guaranteed during the four weeks of school vacations.

Given the shortage of some products in the territories, together with the Ministry of Agriculture, directories of producers were created to share information with the PAE operators. This strategy to connect supply and demand avoided food prices' speculation and overpricing of some products.

The territorial autonomy to alter rules and guarantee the distribution of quality food was essential for the success of Colombia's adaptation. Each territorial entity designed its route of delivery, distribution and the protocols that favoured social distancing.



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# Cambodia

**The Government of Cambodia (GoC)** has been implementing school feeding in cooperation with WFP since 1999. The Cambodian programme runs under three models: conditional cash-transfers called “care scholarships”, regular school meals served on-site and take-home rations (THR). The THR model is now being converted into care scholarships, which are fully financed by the national government. The school meals programme, as well as school infrastructure and complementary school health activities — such as deworming, nutrition education and school gardens — are supported by WFP and other international partners. In 2019, the process of handing over school meals financing to the GoC began, with 90% of activities already taken over from WFP. The programme is also going through a transition towards becoming home-grown and purchasing food items from local producers. School feeding in Cambodia has considerably increased net admission and promotion rates, while contributing to decrease dropouts.

School closures in **Cambodia** were declared on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, with distance learning strategies subsequently implemented. To make up for on-site school meals being halted, THRs of rice were provided to school-aged children’s families. Under that scheme, students have received a benefit of 10kg of rice each — an amount equivalent to one month’s consumption — with a maximum limit of 20kg per family. The baskets were distributed to families of scholarship students or beneficiaries of IDPoor, a poverty eradication programme. A series of hygiene measures and proper social distancing were implemented on distribution sites, and the GoC developed special SOPs for food handling, cooking and distributions. They also worked with schools to guarantee adequate sites for handwashing. Finally, the national budget directed to social protection programmes — including unemployment benefits and school feeding — was increased.

# 3 What have we learned and a way forward?

A stock-take from all presentations, specially from the leaders in the field, bring that flexibility is key to respond to rapidly evolving and complex conditions and measures, including working with new partners, being adaptable and innovative on supply and delivery mechanisms.

A main priority for all is that such responses do not become a focus of infection and a risk to either families nor to staff/volunteers and suppliers.

Some of the main recommendations for government decision makers at national and subnational level:

*Rapid addendum or adaptation of either legislation or standard operations procedures from regular programmes for emergency responses, so the basic needs of the children and their families could be met in a feasible time.*

*In large territories and areas with dispersed population, decentralized systems and regional autonomy to adapt to context-specific situations can facilitate immediate and appropriate actions in each scenario.*

*Models used for WFP and civil emergency situations can prove to be a valid tool and provide effective alternatives also in the medium term in countries where there are effects of previous crisis (Mozambique, affected by natural disasters, for example);*

*Design and negotiate with the local actors the systems of connection between supply and demand can help to avoid speculation, lack of access and rising food prices in times of crisis.*

*Crisis budget might be an institutional option to mobilize extra-resources to adapt programmes, whether to adapt delivery methods, serve families of students in times of crisis.*

The webinar finished with an interesting Q&A session, which can be accessed [here](#).