Expanding the national school meals programme in Ukraine

Policy brief
Abstract
For over a century, countries have implemented school meals programmes to support pupils' well-being, promote school attendance and academic performance, and provide a strong return on investment for their economies and future human capital. Providing school meals at no cost to all pupils within a school, region or country – through universal free school meals policies – magnifies these benefits to a significant degree. During times of war and post-recovery efforts, this focus on child and adolescent well-being is especially critical, as many young people experience psychological trauma, exacerbated by unstable living conditions and inconsistent access to food. The war in Ukraine has had a devastating impact, and now is therefore a particularly important time for Ukraine to expand and further strengthen its national school meals programme, with the goal of implementing a comprehensive universal free school meals policy. External investments and resources should be prioritized to support this initiative and develop a sustainable infrastructure, which will contribute to the short- and long-term health and well-being of Ukraine's youth as the nation transitions to a period of future peace.

Keywords
UKRAINE
ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS
FOOD INSECURITY
CHILD HEALTH
SCHOOLS
Expanding the national school meals programme in Ukraine

Policy brief
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1 Research Consortium is the research initiative of the global School Meals Coalition, which currently assists 96 countries, including Ukraine. This coalition of national governments is committed to developing and strengthening support for the well-being of schoolchildren and adolescents, by rebuilding, improving and scaling up the provision of school meals and complementary school health services by 2030.
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>coronavirus disease</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>internally displaced persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>UAH</td>
<td>Ukrainian hryvnia</td>
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<tr>
<td>UFSM</td>
<td>universal free school meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
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We realized that the idea of feeding children... nutritiously in war time becomes even more difficult to implement, yet even more important. Because our children and our teachers demonstrated true heroism. They did not interrupt their studies. Therefore, it is our desire to support children and teachers, in particular, with food which determines the quality of education.

First Lady Olena Zelenska, opening the construction of Ukraine’s first kitchen factory in Bucha, March 2023
1. Introduction

This report summarizes the rationale and evidence for prioritizing investment in Ukraine’s school meals programme. School meals play an important role in the health and well-being of children and adolescents (hereafter referred to as children). This investment in children is particularly critical during times of war and reconstruction to ensure a consistent source of nutrition, support physical and mental health, create a sense of community, improve school attendance, and create an effective school environment for children to learn as they return to school. School meals programmes can also provide a strong return on investment, including for local agriculture and economies, as well as future human capital, which is especially needed during times of war and post-war recovery efforts. These benefits are magnified with universal free school meals (UFSM), a policy whereby all students within a school, region or country receive a school meal at no cost. Thus, now is a particularly important time for Ukraine to expand and further strengthen its school meals programme. External support will be essential as a catalyst for such a programme in Ukraine, to ensure its success and to develop a sustainable infrastructure that will provide for children’s long-term health, well-being and a peaceful future.
2. Background: national school meals programme in Ukraine

2.1 Past

Prior to the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine in February 2022, Ukraine’s national school meals programme reached approximately 760,000 children, representing roughly 10% of school-aged children (pupils aged 6–18 years) throughout the country (1).

As a joint initiative of the First Lady, Olena Zelenska, and the Government of Ukraine, school meals reforms were initially launched in 2019, which included updates regarding the safety and procurement of school meals. Funding was allocated to 1908 schools to procure and update equipment used to provide school meals (2).

In August 2020, the Government of Ukraine adopted a comprehensive national action plan to promote the reform and to improve the nutritional profile of school meals in Ukraine (3). The resolution brought together various stakeholders and specialists at the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as dieticians and culinary experts. Follow-up regulations and recommendations were developed in alignment with WHO guidelines, with schools retaining flexibility over implementation.

2.2 Current

The war in Ukraine has had a devastating impact on children and families, with an estimated 11 million people throughout Ukraine currently experiencing food insecurity (4).

The Institute of Educational Analytics reported that during the 2022–2023 academic year, 1.5 million students had access to food at school, of which 48% (710,365) were eligible for free meals (5). However, the results of a survey conducted in December 2022, after the start of the war estimated that 60% of students had access to food at school, of which only 22% for free.2

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2. These data are taken from the results of a survey organized by the Ministry of Education and Science, the State Scientific Institution "Institute of Educational Analytics" and the Swiss–Ukrainian DECIDE project. The survey was conducted in December 2022 among the directors of 7940 (representing 61%) general secondary education institutions, using the information and telecommunication system known as the State Information System of Education (6).
Official data show that, compared with the 2021–2022 academic year, the number of students who currently have access to school meals — as well as whose receiving free school meals — has halved, further highlighting the devastating effect of the continuous war on Ukraine (6).

For the 2023–2024 academic year, the Ministry of Education and Science estimated that 650 000 students in Ukraine were eligible for free school meals, of whom 223 000 had internally displaced persons (IDP) status. The Ministry also announced an estimated budget of 13.9 billion Ukrainian hryvnia (UAH) (equivalent to US$ 373 million) covering the free school meals programme for grades 1–4 and acknowledged the support of international partners to address this budget gap (7).

Additional challenges exist that impact the national school meals programme both directly and indirectly, including the capacity of local administrations to collect resources (e.g., taxes) to fund the school meals service, supply-chain disruptions, migration into and out of the country, changes to family structure (with family members in the military), and hybrid or fully remote (online) schools. Only an estimated 58% of students were expected back in school on a full-time basis during the 2023–2024 academic year (2.3 million out of 4.0 million students in total) (8).

Nevertheless, the Government of Ukraine and the Office of the First Lady have continued their efforts to implement the school meals reform during the protracted emergency, demonstrating resilience in prioritizing children’s health. In October 2023 the Government of Ukraine approved a resolution to enact the National Strategy and National Action Plan on reforming school meals up to 2027 (6) (see Box 1).

### Box 1. Goals of the National Strategy on reforming school meals up to 2027

The Strategy sets up four primary goals:

1. ensuring sufficient funding and improving the cost–effectiveness of the school meals programme;
2. modernizing the school food system using the latest technologies, including improving energy efficiency and compliance with Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) standards;
3. supporting school food service employees, for example through training and other educational opportunities; and
4. promoting healthy food choices among students.

Source: Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Order No. 990-r of 27 October 2023 (6).
3. Rationale for prioritizing school meals programmes during times of war and reconstruction

School meals provide a unique opportunity to improve the overall physical, mental and cognitive health of children, who represent the future human capital of nations (11, 12). During times of war, this focus on child well-being is critical, particularly as many children experience psychological traumas, exacerbated by unstable living conditions and inconsistent access to food. Additionally, as students return to school during times of war and reconstruction, school meals play a key role in supporting school attendance and students’ ability to learn. School meals also help create a much-needed safe environment for children and a sense of community, while ensuring they have a reliable source of essential nutrients, all of which are particularly important for their well-being during times of instability brought on by war. More broadly, as a nation faces and recovers from war, a robust school meals programme provides a strong return on investment, including as a catalyst for boosting domestic agriculture and the economy more broadly.

3.1 Historical context

Over the past century, several countries have specifically implemented school meals programmes as safeguards during times of war and to support post-war recovery efforts. For example, both the United Kingdom and USA implemented national (but not universally free) school meals programmes as measures of national security during times of war and to support post-war recovery efforts (13, 14). Finland and Sweden implemented comprehensive, UFSM programmes through the passage of Education Acts to address post-Second World War
poverty and malnutrition, as well as reconstruction efforts (15, 16). In the Republic of Korea, school meals began initially after the Korean War to distribute international food aid to rural children. Much later, in 2011, a UFSM policy was expanded to all students to support children’s nutrition and healthy physical and mental growth (17, 18).

Additionally, national school meals programmes have been increasingly recognized as critical to support children’s health and well-being, school enrolment and national economies, all of which are also essential during times of war and during reconstruction. For example, Estonia implemented a UFSM policy in 2002 to provide a social safety net, promote student health and educational goals, and to support agriculture (19). India expanded their midday meal policy in 2008 to support school attendance, as well as to promote gender and social equity (20, 21). Brazil enacted a law establishing a School Feeding Programme in 2009, mandating school meals for all students in order to address food insecurity and school enrolment, while also aiming to combat rising obesity rates in the country and support local agriculture to stimulate the economy (22, 23).

3.2 Key benefits of UFSM policies

Historically, many countries have implemented targeted school meals programmes for children from low-income households, but countries are increasingly considering UFSM models due to the growing evidence documenting the benefits of these policies and the need to support recovery efforts related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The benefits of UFSM policies are even more pronounced during a time of war and during post-war recovery efforts. The following summarizes the key benefits of UFSM policies based on an international systematic review of the literature (24).

3.2.1 Impact on child well-being

- There is strong evidence that UFSM policies increase participation in and consumption of school meals, which can lead to short-term and long-term improvements in diet quality, particularly in the presence of strong nutrition standards.
- Importantly, through increased access to school meals, UFSM can decrease food insecurity, with important implications for children’s physical and mental health (25).
- Reliable access to food in schools can also reduce household stress and improve household financial resources, which can have downstream effects on children’s overall well-being. This may be particularly important during times of war and reconstruction to mitigate some of the mental health challenges faced by children and families.
- UFSM are also associated with improvements in school attendance and academic performance, and can thus be an effective complimentary strategy in Ukraine, as schools re-open.
- Finally, reliable access to school meals provided through UFSM policies can improve children’s social and emotional well-being, which can be critical during times of war and post-war reconstruction.

3.2.2 Financial impacts

- National school meals programmes have a long, successful history of supporting local farmers and boosting economies, particularly during times of war and post-war recovery efforts. Because of the comprehensive nature of UFSM, the benefits for local economies are even greater than smaller, targeted school meals programmes.
- First, UFSM rely heavily on nationally grown and produced foods, thus supporting local agriculture and businesses (26).
- Expanding school meals programmes also requires increasing the workforce for implementation, thus also increasing job opportunities in schools (in addition to potential training opportunities for students, influencing future employment) and corresponding farms and businesses that support the production of school meals. The WFP estimates that on average nearly 1400 jobs are created for 100 000 children fed through school meals programmes, which would translate to roughly 55 000 jobs in Ukraine, based on current estimates, and with even greater job growth if children who have been displaced during the war return to Ukraine (1). School meals programmes also create a bridge between short-term improvements in food security, leading to long-term gains in human capital development.
- Indirect benefits can also be gained through improved financial resources for families (resulting from the cost-savings when children eat at school for free), which can further reduce the risk of food insecurity among households with children, as well as encouraging reinvestment through purchases in the local economy.
- Through these benefits to agriculture, education, health, and social protection, research has found that for every US$ 1 invested in school meals programmes, there is a return on investment of US$ 9 (26).
- Research has also found that there are long-term financial impacts on health-care savings resulting from the continuation of healthier dietary habits promoted by school meals and subsequent reductions in cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer in adulthood (27).
3.3 UFSM models

Multiple UFSM models exist, varying in strength and with different limitations (28) (see Table 1 for examples). While a nationally comprehensive UFSM policy is thought of as the gold standard and benefits the greatest number of children, other UFSM policies can also be considered to support a successful transition towards ensuring all students have access to school meals.

Table 1. Examples of national UFSM policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Countries with model</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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| At least one free school meal daily (typically lunch), available to all children nationally | Brazil, Estonia, Finland, India, Republic of Korea, Sweden                          | ▶ Considered the gold standard  
▶ Most comprehensive model, thus ensuring all students have consistent access to school meals | ▶ Most expensive to implement                                                                   |
| Free school meals available to younger students, typically during their first 3–5 years of primary school | United Kingdom (England, Scotland)                                                   | ▶ Ensures all young children have access to adequate nutrition during critical times of growth and development  
▶ Less expensive than the gold standard model  
▶ Can be used as a first step to transition towards the gold standard model | ▶ Coverage is limited to primary school children only. However, all students, regardless of age, require access to nutritious foods for overall growth and development, wellness, and academic success |
| Free school meals available to all students in high-poverty schools or districts | USA                                                                                  | ▶ Ensures children who are at greatest risk of food insecurity have access to adequate nutrition during critical times of growth and development  
▶ Less expensive than the gold standard model  
▶ Can be used as a first step to transition towards the gold standard model | ▶ Creates a more complicated system of providing school meals to children from low-income households but who live in higher income areas  
▶ Requires existing databases to determine which are the high-poverty schools/districts |
| Local free school meals policies, whereby all students within a state/province/oblast receive a free school meal | USA (specific states)                                                               | ▶ Can support greater coverage of free school meals  
▶ Less expensive than the gold standard model  
▶ Can be used as a first step to transition towards the gold standard model | ▶ Coverage is limited to certain regions  
▶ Regions typically must have sufficient financial resources to cover part of the cost of school meals |
| Mandatory participation by all students in a national school meals programme, with school meals only available free of charge to students from low-income households | Japan                                                                                | ▶ Can support greater coverage of free school meals  
▶ Less expensive than the gold standard model | ▶ May not be feasible for households that are not eligible for free meals to pay for the school meals  
▶ Model may not be culturally or politically acceptable in some countries |
4. Catalysing and sustaining a successful school meals programme

4.1 External funding

External funding will be critical as a catalyst for the successful expansion and future sustainability of Ukraine’s school meals programme, to cover the costs of food, labour, infrastructure and equipment. Prior research has found that external funding plays an essential role in implementation of national school meals programmes in low- and middle-income countries and, importantly, these countries are then able to transition to a self-funding model, relying on domestic resources. Currently, domestic funds are the primary source of funding in all countries, representing over 98% of the share of funding for school meals globally (1). Thus, external investments and resources will be critical to ensure the long-term success of Ukraine’s school meals programme. The Government of Ukraine and the Ministry of Finance, along with various stakeholders are working to develop a comprehensive and transparent funding mechanism for school meals — utilizing a local subventions approach — which would enable the efficient and accountable allocation of external funds to reach schools throughout Ukraine. The support of a centralized School Nutrition Reform Office can further help efforts to ensure the appropriate transfer of funding from international agencies. Furthermore, the Government of Ukraine is also currently evaluating long-term options to build sustainable mechanisms to effectively mobilize internal resources for their school meals programme.

The consideration of community assets can help manage costs, such as using underutilized restaurants that closed due to COVID-19 and/or the war, satellite kitchens and hubs, community centres and sports facilities with kitchens. Current school meals production models can also be continued and expanded in Ukraine, including:

1. full-cycle kitchens (that is, on-site cooking from scratch – typically the most expensive, but greatest palatability);
2. hub kitchens (that is, food transported from a central kitchen – moderately expensive and moderately palatable); and
3. factory kitchens (that is, pre-prepared and frozen food that is then transported to schools – typically the least expensive, but also the least palatable).
4.2 Future considerations

- It is important to consider existing implementing agencies and donors, critical as a catalyst for Ukraine’s school meals programme.
- Robust quality-assurance systems will be needed to monitor the school meals programme, including compliance, quality control, and accountability mechanisms. These systems can be developed with the support of existing organizations.
- Engagement and buy-in from key stakeholders will be necessary, including parents, students, school administrations and teachers, cafeteria/canteen staff, local agriculture/suppliers, and government officials. School meals programmes are typically most successful when leadership understands the value of school meals programmes.
- Implementation and expansion of local farm-to-school initiatives should be prioritized (e.g., contributing fresh foods), given the alignment with Ukraine’s school meals reforms and the key role of agriculture.
- Complimentary policies that enhance the success of UFSM policies should be considered, including (24, 29):
  - implementing and maintaining strong nutrition standards (e.g., continuation of Ukraine’s school nutrition reforms);
  - ensuring both the cultural appropriateness and palatability of the meals, for example by collaborating with chefs (continuing initiatives with chefs and nutritionists in Ukraine);
  - allowing sufficient time for students to eat at school (e.g., at least 30-minute lunch breaks);
  - considering alternative breakfast models (e.g., initiatives involving pupils eating breakfast in the classroom/other settings as appropriate); and
  - continuing and enforcing existing policies that limit or prohibit the sale of so-called competitive foods (that is, snacks or beverages sold in schools outside of the school meals programme).
Conclusions

For over a century, various countries have used school meals programmes as a legitimate investment in children’s well-being, investing in their future and contributing to resilience during times of war and recovery. An expanded national school meals programme – with the goal of a comprehensive UFSM policy – will contribute to both the short- and long-term well-being and productivity of children in Ukraine and catalyse local economies during times of war and throughout future reconstruction efforts. External funding will be critical to support this initiative, which should be prioritized given the strength of the evidence to support children’s long-term health and well-being as Ukraine transitions to a period of future peace.
Expanding the national school meals programme in Ukraine

References


3 All references accessed 14 February 2024.


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The WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

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