Making school feeding count for nutrition: A call for investing in more and better data

18th December 2023 / Yale Warner / No Comments

Authors: Rebecca Heidkamp, Nadia Akseer, Ayala Wineman, and Arlene Mitchell

*Poverty pushes almost one in every 10 children around the world to skip school and work to earn. Such conditions can perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty and malnutrition. Amid all this, can school help? School meal programs have emerged as a beacon of hope, serving as a crucial source of nutrition and sustenance. These programs have proven their ability to combat hunger, improve school attendance and academic performance, a*nd *even boost overall child health. However, despite their immense potential, the effectiveness of school meal programs often remains under-examined due to a lack of comprehensive data and rigorous evaluation methodologies.*

School meals & stunting

School meal programs are active in at least 173 countries and reach 418 million children. Despite reaching nearly the full childhood age spectrum, school meal programs are not widely recognized as a tool to address childhood malnutrition in a stunting context. They reach children outside the "first 1,000 days". Thus, they are understood to not contribute to stunting reduction targets, hence being underprioritized in the nutrition community.

However, studies have shown that stunting reduction remains achievable among children older than two. A study in India found that children whose families were affected by a severe drought experienced stunted growth. Still, children who participated in the Midday Meals program during the same time did not experience stunted growth. Even the girls benefiting from school meals are less likely to have stunted children owing to improved education, fertility, and utilization of health services.

Why do we need data?

This is where the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF), founded in 2006, a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing school meal programs worldwide, comes into the picture. GCNF, while working with governments and other partners, has made significant strides in bridging the data gap and providing actionable insights to enhance school meal programs.

In 2021, GCNF surveyed 83 low- and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). Nearly two-thirds (65%) included some preschool students, nearly all (98%) included primary school students, and about one-third (36%) included secondary school students. Particularly in LMICs, these programs have increased in scale (Figure 1).

Our understanding of the importance of nutrition for a child's physical, brain, and social development through late adolescence has expanded, as have concerns about diet quality, rising consumption of ultra-processed foods, and other risk factors for diet-related non-communicable

diseases in low-income countries. (S1, S2, S3) Moreover, school feeding provides an opportunity for multi-sector engagement and impact—not just for nutrition but also for education, agriculture, human rights, and economic growth. (S1, S2, S3, S4)

Identifying relevant survey instruments

Nevertheless, data on coverage of school meals are not systematically collected nor reported at the population level in ways that can be compared to other childhood nutrition interventions. Global multi-topic surveys—including the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), and Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS)—often lack data on participation in school meal programs, as well as anthropometry, micronutrient status, diet quality, and food security across the childhood sub-populations reached through schools.

Now is the time for stakeholders in LMICs—including policymakers, program implementers, advocates, and donors—to make school-based interventions a more visible aspect of multi-sector nutrition programs. Population-based surveys and administrative data systems should collect and report data in ways that are useful for decision-making. Multi-sector nutrition monitoring frameworks should include indicators of the reach and impact of school meals.

Types of indicators for school meal programs

Foremost is the need for standardized school feeding program coverage indicators that disaggregate by meaningful age groups, geographies, and gender. Feasible indicators should be developed for survey and administrative sources and comparable with other multi-sector nutrition coverage indicators. This facilitates analysis of co-coverage or composite coverage of multisectoral nutrition interventions at household and administrative levels – methods that Data for Decisions in Nutrition (DataDENT) and others are advancing to support policy processes.

Existing global and national survey platforms can be modified to collect relevant indicators. Global multi-topic household surveys, such as the MICS, are already collecting school-related data in social protection and education modules and early childhood nutrition data in other modules. With minor adaptations, survey modules could capture essential information on household members reached by school feeding. Stand-alone national nutrition surveys – typically led by national governments and with more adaptable questionnaires – can also capture school feeding indicators. School surveys may also be used, though they lack the representativeness of national household surveys.

How does GCNF help?

Education sector information systems are a natural place to gather school-feeding information systematically. Statistics offices can play a role in making these administrative data publicly accessible and interoperable with other sector-specific systems. Additionally, the Global Survey of School Meal Programs ©, launched in 2019 by GCNF, fills an important gap in school feeding data, capturing administrative information through national focal points in a consistent, comprehensive, and recurring manner. Its value will grow the longer it is implemented.

While the investments required to collect high-quality school nutrition data are modest, the returns can be significant. Better data on multi-sector nutrition actions can help accelerate progress toward global nutrition targets.

Posted in Blog