



Joint Action for Healthy and Sustainable School Nutrition

Summary of key results

The conference

School nutrition is considered an indispensable building block for sustainably improving child nutrition and certainly has an effect on the development of the entire food system. As part of its **“Policies against Hunger”** conference series, the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture organised a three-day virtual event from 23 – 25 June 2021, which aimed to provide a **platform for international experts in school nutrition** and contribute to reflection, dialogue and decision-making regarding the implementation of policies and measures that are crucial to better adapt school nutrition to students’ needs and ambitions. The output of the conference is expected to enrich the ongoing international political processes in the run-up to the UN Food Systems Summit.

Up to 600 viewers from all over the world tuned in to follow the live streams of the kick-off and the closing of the conference.

At the invitation of German Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture **Julia Klöckner**, who opened the XIII “Policies against Hunger” conference, more than 120 experts – representatives from governments, United Nations organisations, civil society, the private sector, schools, cities, and academia – came together in different working groups to discuss how to foster joint action to strengthen schools as systems and platforms for making nutrition healthier and more sustainable for children and adolescents. The interactive working groups provided an opportunity for exchanging good practices and challenges in healthy and sustainable school nutrition and formulating key messages for learning and improvements.

Participants also joined a side event to present the current state of play regarding the *‘School Meals Coalition’*, a multi-stakeholder initiative to be officially launched at the **UN Food Systems Summit** in New York in **September 2021**. Germany is contributing by creating a **peer-to-peer network** to organise an exchange of lessons learned on school meals and school nutrition between interested and engaged stakeholders of different countries.

This summary report documents individual and collective thoughts, ideas, proposals, concerns and suggestions. It does not necessarily represent a consensus of all conference participants, but aims to provide a relevant contribution to the debate about better school nutrition worldwide.



Healthy and sustainable school nutrition

German Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture **Julia Klöckner** stressed in her opening statement:

'If we take the right to adequate food seriously, in particular with a view to children and to our future, one thing we need to jointly promote at international level is school nutrition.'

German Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development **Dr. Gerd Müller** voiced his firm conviction that a world without hunger is possible and promoting healthy diets for school children in low-income countries is an important measure to achieve this goal.

In her key note speech, **Leslie Drake**, Executive Director of the Partnership for Child Development (PCD), Imperial College London stressed that

- it has never been clearer that the **school is an effective platform** for health and nutrition services, including school feeding, and delivery of quality education, including health, nutrition and hygiene education; engagement with all of the partners involved i.e., the caterers, the teachers, farmers and all other actors along the supply chain is needed for effective delivery of school meals using a variety of locally available food items;
- **schools are stable platforms and we need to use them more effectively** for healthy and sustainable school nutrition; support to the children has to include effective policies, school health and nutrition services, safe water and sanitation in school environments, and health education.

Panel experts highlighted that

- children can access a whole range of services in schools, including nutritional, health and food support; **tremendous efforts were made to reach children in times of school closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic** through adaptations of programmes, e.g., remote learning as well as take-home rations or cash transfers to replace school meals; **the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing disparities**, in education and school nutrition, including malnutrition, with long-term physical, mental, social and economic consequences; school meals need to be part of a comprehensive package of services in schools, including mental health and psychosocial support; schools play a central role to reach children, especially those from marginalised groups;
- in **Brazil**, the federal government, regional governments and municipalities are in charge of school nutrition including home-grown school meals; **the 2009 school nutrition programme** is based on three pillars: (i) a law on sustainability, (ii) a special budget for school meals and (iii) local procurement of nutritious food from small-scale farmers with a 30 percent provision of locally sourced food as a condition for all



school-meal programmes; involvement of (local) stakeholders, esp. producers, managers, and others, is crucial for programme success; special emphasis is put on marginalised groups, including indigenous populations; programmes need to be integrated, including e.g., health and dietary education;

- **nutrition beyond meals**, including nutrition education, teacher training, water and sanitation and age-appropriate supportive education material, needs to be in the focus to advance education, particularly for vulnerable communities; school meals allow students to focus on learning rather than their (short term) hunger and food; **assessing existing programmes and models and what works in particular contexts is crucial**; bringing all stakeholders who are needed for appropriate school nutrition programmes, i.e., governments, local communities and teachers, together in a process to build acceptable and workable school nutrition systems is important; five key elements need to be in place: financing, an enabling policy environment, intersectoral collaboration, institutional capacities, and community engagements.

Establishing successful school nutrition systems

Constituting key elements of healthy and sustainable school nutrition systems, the following four topics were discussed in different working groups and **key messages** reported to the global audience at the closing event of the virtual conference:

1. School nutrition policies, legal frameworks, quality standards and infrastructure;
2. Nutrition education in schools and in their environments;
3. Sustainable school food systems; and
4. Secure school nutrition in crisis situations.

School nutrition policy, legal frameworks, quality standards and infrastructure

Inspired by expert inputs on 'Schools as a System to Improve Nutrition', the 'EAT RIGHT INDIA initiative', and the 'SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME', the participants in this working group discussed three guiding questions.

Here are the **experts' key messages** related to school nutrition policy, legal frameworks, quality standards and infrastructure:

- **Infrastructure** (technology, procurement, finance, supply, etc.) needs to be improved and to be available to guarantee safe & nutritious food for every child. This implies sufficient capacity for the various actors, including (district) governance institutions, to be able to deliver quality nutrition sustainably, e.g. (public) purchasing of large volumes of food.



- **All stakeholders need to be included.** In addition, **political will** is needed to enhance public-private partnerships and engage local communities, especially teachers, parents and students. This needs to take place in an **enabling and coherent policy framework**, i.e. one that works across multiple sectors. Policy should be strongly embedded in a **legal structure**, e.g., Right to Food in the constitution in South Africa; but should also restrict marketing to kids for more sustainable (longer term) results.
- **The private sector is a special partner** that needs to be regarded in terms of the impact it can have on children's nutrition status, and not in terms of the partnership itself. For example, industry plays a role in food safety but also in marketing of less healthy products.

Nutrition education in schools and in their environments

Expert inputs on 'School-based food and nutrition education', 'Food education in Finland promoting the well-being of the whole school community', and 'Nutrition education in sustainable school environments' paved the way for an interactive exchange on three guiding questions.

Here are the participants' key messages related to nutrition education in schools and in their environments:

- **School-based food and nutrition education (SFNE)** must aim at **real life competences** that can help schoolchildren and their families improve their everyday food practices. It must be made **compulsory in formal school curricula**, designed based on schoolchildren's priorities and circumstances (i.e., meeting them where they are), available for all grades and implemented using a hands-on approach. Ideally, it can be its own subject or integrated in a specific subject, depending on education policies, capacities and context.
- SFNE needs to **move away from 'teaching generic nutrition science'** and **respond to current sustainable development challenges**. This involves children and the school community acknowledging that food is personal and has sociocultural meaning, learning about the food system and being active in the process to improve the results of that system for their health and that of the environment.
- A systemic approach to **capacity development coupled with fostering school-level champions** is needed for advancing the quality of SFNE. Teacher training, as well as incentives for career advancement, need to be institutionalised. Beyond teachers, other key actors in the school system (students, parents, school staff, cooks, suppliers, vendors) interact and influence each other's food practices. Meaningful engagements and interaction between and among these are recommended.
- To be effective, SFNE requires **policies and regulations that improve the school food environment** (including nutritious school meals) and that can be used as learning opportunities to complement formal food education.



- **Digital platforms and channels, including social media, are relevant tools for SFNE;** however, the focus should not be so much on the tools per se, but on how they are used to bring about change. Digital platforms are a good opportunity for better understanding children’s food preferences and for engaging with them on their own terms. Current online and blended-learning modalities for food education must not overburden parents and caregivers, but rather engage them and ensure that they can see the benefits.

Development of sustainable school food systems

Inspired by expert inputs on ‘Promoting sustainable supply and value chains for healthy school meals’ and ‘Involving Kids and the Whole School in a Healthy and Sustainably Food and Meal Culture’, the experts participating in this working group agreed on the following key messages related to the development of sustainable school food systems:

- **Sustainability comes in multiple forms** (e.g., environmental, economic, and socio-cultural). Context is key.
- **Developing environmental sustainability criteria needs to be contextualised** to different national and sub-national settings, included in policies/legislation with monitoring frameworks to put theory into practice.
- **Food for school meals** should (if possible) be produced and procured **locally/regionally**, focusing on **short, sustainable food value chains**, and involving **small-scale farmers** and **SMEs**. Unions and group-organising can facilitate this.
- **Working collaboratively through a multi-sectoral/multi-actor approach**, recognising each sector’s distinctive responsibility and working in coordination. This should include different levels of government, SMEs/private sector, school staff, parents, farmers, indigenous groups, NGOs/CSOs, and especially **CHILDREN**.
- **Schools should provide a safe and healthy food environment** for children, supporting sustainable food habits and choices. It is important to recognise that nutrition priorities will be contextual.
- **Political will, commitment, and funding by government** (national, regional and municipal) is pivotal.

Securing school nutrition in crisis situations, such as pandemics

Two expert inputs on ‘Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school nutrition’ and ‘Measures to ensure the continued operation of School Feeding in Crisis situations’ triggered a lively exchange among the experts participating in this working group.

They agreed on the following key messages related to securing school nutrition in crisis situations:



- **Take stock:** The global school health and nutrition community should urgently take stock from the Covid-19 pandemic experience and develop **more detailed guidance based on evidence** from implementation and outcomes.

a) Implementation:

Identify the key lessons learned from ethical and cost-effective programmatic practice. For example, country context is essential, legal instruments and guidelines must be flexible enough to respond to crises, programmes should retain the ability to adapt to technologies and engage communities in new ways.

b) Outcomes:

Analyse the effectiveness of school nutrition guidelines in crises, and recognise the importance of school health and nutrition interventions in a child's development. For example, understanding whether and how school children specifically benefited from the crisis responses, whether these responses, which adequately target hunger, household food security and community safety nets, benefit the nutrition and education of the school children.

- **Evidence-based advocacy:** Develop evidence-based advocacy and messaging that shows how nutrition, health and education together are the key elements of a child's development and the creation of human capital, and also show how these school-based programmes offer benefits to agriculture, employment, gender, social protection, and other sectors and topics. This advocacy can help countries to maintain the relevance of the policy environment and funding in crises, especially if **stronger alliances** are built with food producers, the private sector, the media and the local community.
- **Flexibility and creativity:** in responding to the crises, it is important to be flexible, creative, adaptable and innovative to **leave no one behind**.

Joint action to make healthy, sustainable school nutrition the 'new normal'

Referring to key messages from the working groups, UN experts and representatives from government, civil society and business gave their reflections and reactions at the closing panel event:

- **High level of agreement with and appreciation of the working group results**, especially with regard to stakeholder involvement in school nutrition, including capacity development of teachers, parents, and product suppliers;
- **Strong reference to small and medium enterprises (SME)** as one of the key partners in contributing to school nutrition, esp. school meals, is highly relevant; the link to policies and education is important; representatives from SMEs also need education



and information about good nutrition, information regarding the expectations of programmes, and related capacity strengthening in order to be able to deliver the required quality and volumes; the focus on appropriate involvement of farmers and SMEs also reflects the Philippines' experience.

- School nutrition is not about preaching to children about what they should eat; it is about the **school environment, about involving the private sector, and about focusing on local food procurement**, appropriate marketing and global food standards and principles with possibilities of local adaptations;
- **Flexibility, creativity and adaptability are key** for successful school nutrition programmes. In countries and contexts where school nutrition programmes are implemented, emergencies are likely to arise and all actors involved need to be prepared accordingly; multiple dimensions of sustainability need to be taken into consideration and addressed through multiple partnerships; key take-aways of the conference are **children, collaboration, contexts, and commitment (the '4 Cs')**.

The way forward

The closing session highlighted the following:

- the focus of nutrition interventions is shifting from the 1,000 to the 8,000-day window of opportunities, thus including **school children as major target groups of nutrition interventions** and highlighting the importance of school systems as platforms for concerted multi-sectoral actions;
- the **global pandemic** and the related containment measures, incl. school closure, have dramatically demonstrated that **school nutrition systems, as part of social protection systems, are of crucial importance for the well-being of school children**, their families and local communities, far beyond the mere provision of school meals;
- the world is preparing for the **UN Food Systems Summit in New York** where solutions for local, regional and global action for transforming food systems as an important contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals will be identified and the international '*Schools Meals Coalition*' is expected to be launched.

Dr. Martin Frick, Deputy to the Special Envoy for the Food Systems Summit at the United Nations, underlined the impetus the event provided for the discussion on school nutrition at the **Food Systems Summit in September 2021**.

David Beasley, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, concluded the conference by **highlighting the importance of international cooperation** for the achievement of healthy and sustainable school nutrition and fighting global hunger.



'The investment (in school feeding programmes) pays back huge dividends ... because healthier, educated children become productive adults. ... Rebuilding and expanding school feeding programmes must be a global priority. ... We all need to join forces and work together to meet the scale of this challenge.'

The conference enabled all participants and stakeholders to gain new insights and perspectives and confirm certain positions. These insights and perspectives can be used for global policy processes aiming to develop sustainable school nutrition systems and programmes worldwide to ensure the human right to adequate food and nutrition for children and adolescents.

In his closing remarks, Parliamentary State Secretary **Uwe Feiler** stressed that the **German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture is committed** to spread the conference outcomes in the run-up to as well as at the **UN Food Systems Summit** in September 2021. He called for strong and joint actions for healthy and sustainable School Nutrition, e.g., under the umbrella of the upcoming global "School Meals Coalition".