

THE POWER OF PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING FOR SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS:

GCNF and WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger experience

By

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and

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Peer-to-Peer Learning

Peer-to-peer learning involves the sharing of knowledge and experience between individuals who perceive themselves as peers (in job roles, title, hierarchical standing, etc.) and who apply the shared knowledge and learning into actions in their work.

Successful peer-to-peer learning approaches take into consideration several mutually reinforcing dimensions: interpersonal and social dynamics, the level of trust and commitment, differing learning styles of participants. Experiential methods and a conducive learning environment and venue support peer learning and retention, and peer-to-peer learning approaches embrace the concept that people also learn through teaching.



“Peer learning is a potentially powerful way of sharing knowledge about doing public sector reform. This learning involves individuals exchanging knowledge and experience with each other and diffusing this learning back to their organizations to ensure an impact—at scale—on reform initiatives. While peer learning entails complex organizational logistics, it avoids the risk of focusing on process rather than product. It recognizes that ultimately learning takes place between individuals and it facilitates interpersonal interchanges that are well matched and that are based on trust and commitment.”

– *A Guide to Peer-to-Peer Learning: How to make peer-to-peer support and learning effective in the public sector?* by Matt Andrews and Nick Manning, 2016

School Meal Programs

The World Bank defines school meal or school feeding programs as “targeted social safety nets that provide both educational and health benefits to the most vulnerable children, thereby increasing enrollment rates, reducing absenteeism, and improving food security at the household level”.

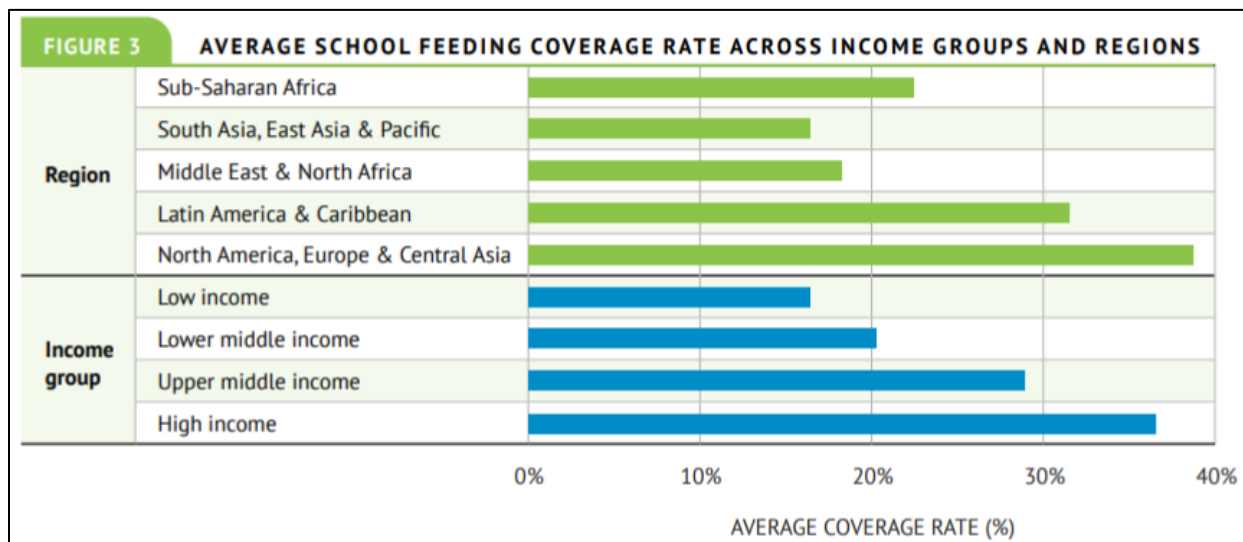


These programs comprise one of the largest—if not the largest—social safety net programs in the world, reaching hundreds of millions of children each school day, and serving as an income transfer by offsetting food costs for involved families. The Bank states that in addition to having a positive impact on access to food, school food programs also improve nutritional status, gender equity, and educational status, in turn, contributing to human and economic development.

Challenges for School Meal Programs in Low-Income Countries

The unfortunate truth is that despite the scale of the programs in the aggregate, too few low-income country governments provide school food for their schoolchildren.

Coverage is weakest in the poorest regions of the world, as shown in this chart from *School Meal Programs Around the World* (GCNF 2021):



Most low-income countries have school meal programs that are being implemented by “implementing partners”, including NGOs such as Akshaya Patra, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Counterpart International, Global Communities/Project Concern International, GIZ, Manna Trust, Mary’s Meals, Mercy Corps, Nascent Solutions, Plan International, Prolepsis Institute, Save the Children, Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI), World Vision, and the United Nations World Food Program (WFP).

Many low-income governments have expressed their intent to take over the management of programs in their countries and have taken some steps in that direction. They are struggling, however, with the complexities and challenges involved in building the capacities and obtaining the financing necessary to independently manage their own programs.

Partners Addressing the Challenges Using Peer-to-Peer Approaches

Multiple organizations have stepped up over the years to assist governments to address the complexities and challenges. Two of the organizations—Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) and World Food Program (WFP) Centre of Excellence in Brazil (CoE) are authors of this paper. This paper documents their experiences in using peer-to-peer learning techniques and networking to speed the process for low-income country governments to take ownership and sustainably manage their own school meal programs.



Since 1997, GCNF has organized the Global Child Nutrition Forum, an annual meeting of school feeding leaders from around the world. The Forum has been hosted in eleven different countries, giving host countries the opportunity to showcase their school meal programs. Forums normally consist of four or five days of in-person activities that provide a number of formal and informal peer-learning and networking opportunities. Participating countries have an opportunity to discuss their programs and innovations with their peers and to describe and learn about others' programs and practices as they interact.

The most popular peer-learning aspect of the Forum each year has been the opportunity for participants to visit local schools. As they learn about the host's school meal program and observe it in operation, they can ask questions and provide feedback and suggestions to both the local implementers and the programs' leaders.

A second significant GCNF activity that promotes peer learning and networking is its Global Survey of School Meal Programs[®]. Building on country-specific presentations and surveys linked to its Forums, GCNF implemented the Global Survey in 2019, using standard terminology and a standard set of questions to gather a comprehensive set of information regarding all key aspects of school meal programs. The survey covers both national-level data (re policies, financing, coverage, jobs created, links to local agriculture, key challenges, etc.) and program-level data, such as foods used in school menus, community involvement, complementary activities (e.g., deworming treatment, handwashing requirements, nutrition education, school gardens, etc.), and more.

Key products and activities linked to the Global Survey support peer-to-peer dialogue, learning, and identification of recommended/best practices. For example, GCNF produces a summary report of each country's response to the survey. Each is in the same standard format, making it very easy for school meal leaders to compare programs and learn from other countries' models and successes.

The second round of the Global Survey is underway in 2021 as this is being written, and GCNF plans to periodically conduct the Survey into the future. This will allow further analysis of progress, trends,

and the impact of significant events (such as natural disasters or civil strife, the COVID-19 pandemic, and global movements—including the School Meals Coalition).



WFP Centre of Excellence Against Hunger in Brazil (CoE) is a global hub for knowledge exchange, capacity development and technical assistance to help countries achieve zero hunger. Over the past ten years, the CoE supported more than 80 countries in the development of food and nutrition security policies and initiatives, particularly social safety net programs that include school feeding connected to local agriculture and nutrition.

The foundation of WFP’s Centres of Excellence - and particularly the one in Brazil - is the use of South-South and Triangular Cooperation to showcase positive experiences in school health and nutrition programs, such as the successful Brazilian case.

Development practitioners want to learn from the practical experience of others who have gone through, or are going through, similar challenges. The CoE connects countries through South-South exchanges and supports them in a variety of activities: developing legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, pilot projects, technical training, national consultations and strategies to promote participation of stakeholders at different levels.



The CoE-GCNF Partnership: Providing opportunities for peer learning



The Center of Excellence and GCNF have partnered in various ways over the past ten years, but most importantly around the Global Child Nutrition Forum. The CoE has invited delegations of representatives from other countries to visit Brazil and observe the Brazil experience in person and provides technical assistance, training and other support. GCNF similarly hosted other countries’ delegations who wished to observe the U.S. school meal programs in its early years, and also provides technical assistance, training, and advisory services. Both the CoE and GCNF are also primarily focused on school meal programs in low-income and lower-middle income countries where the needs are the greatest.

Thus the partnership evolved primarily around the Global Child Nutrition Forums, which have provided an annual opportunity for connecting and re-connecting with the delegations and countries, to keep the dialogue going, introduce the participating countries to one another, demonstrate third-country examples that build on the bilateral relationships, and to follow up with countries on common issues that cut across countries and programs.

Some other positive aspects of this partnership have included:

- The partnership has helped to reach more countries and bring more experience and options into the discussions.
- It has provided an important role model of trusting organizations and people working together (rather than competing).
- It has brought a broader set of partner experiences, information, languages and styles to joint offerings and helped to make the work more interesting and responsive to different learning styles and needs of those engaging with us.
- Both partners have strong respect for all countries and people and for one another, which has conveyed and set a positive environment wherein participants' could both share and learn.

The Global Child Nutrition Forum: Peer-to-peer learning and networking

Implemented annually since 1997, the Global Child Nutrition Forum brings together country policymakers, leaders of national school meal programs, implementing partners, donors, and experts from around the world to share their experiences and learn of best practices and the latest developments relevant to their work. Co-organized for many years with WFP CoE, and the hosting country, the Forum lasts 4-5 days and is held in different locations each year in order to showcase and learn from local experience. The last in-person Forum was held in Cambodia in December 2019.



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Forum was held virtually for the first time.

The Forum has been built on a peer-to-peer learning model, and offers a variety of activities and types of sessions and experiences to support different modes of learning and sharing.



Participants thrive on the Forum's reliability year in and year out; the opportunity to connect and share with peers and interact with experts; the chance to visit other countries and see their programs; exposure to the latest developments, good practices, and tools; and the unique blend of supportive, non-judgmental, fun and serious activities.

The Forum has had an impact on national governments' – particularly low-income and lower-middle-income country governments'-- learning to manage and improve upon school meal programs. African government ownership and management of school meal programs have grown measurably and steadily over the years, for example. This is not uniquely attributable to the Forum, but the Forum has been a reliable and supportive partner in the process.

Approaches: What works

GCNF has set the agenda for Forums, and negotiated the activities carried out in the Forum week. Most of the methods and hypotheses employed are based on experiential-and peer-learning models and positive deviation. Some of the approaches used and learning gained are listed below.

1. **Establishing an annual theme** to serve as the spine of the event helps to link and provide some cohesion across sessions and activities. That said, for a week-long event, there still needs to be flexibility to cover some topics important to the participants that are not strictly adherent to the theme.
2. Setting **high-level objectives** can help to remind organizers and participants alike of why we come together.
3. Setting **session-specific objectives** helps to keep facilitators, speakers, and presentations focused and on topic.
4. Offering **different types of sessions** helps to break up each day, provide opportunities for different learning styles to benefit, and encourages needed physical movement for participants.

5. Ensuring **adequate time for participant expression and interaction** is difficult to achieve—especially in plenary sessions—but extremely important for engaging the participants, supporting their needs and views, and showcasing peers’ examples, priorities, questions, and issues. Each delegation—ideally each person--needs to be offered an opportunity to make statements or ask questions, even if they decline to speak.

6. Scheduling **regular, substantial and conveniently located breaks** of at least 20 minutes, mealtimes of at least 90 minutes, and “free time” at least one evening of the four evenings of the Forum allow participants to socialize, plan and participate in side meetings and informal discussions that are critical for networking, relationship building, easing fatigue, and for enjoying local attractions.



7. **Simultaneous translation in multiple languages** for all “core” sessions and as many of the other sessions and activities as possible helps all participants to actively engage in the Forum and to feel on equal footing with peers who do not speak the same language.

8. Allowing **some individual control of participants’ schedules** is important, but needs to be done very carefully. Presenting too many options can result in confusion and disarray. Presenting unclear directions or explanations can also result in confusion. And organizers need to balance achieving goals and objectives along an agreed theme with participant choice and having some options to “vote with one’s feet”.

9. Careful **management of professional hierarchy issues** can allow basic protocol to be followed for high-level participants while—most importantly-- treating everyone as important and included, regardless of title, rank, age, etc. This has been a particularly challenge to manage, but the primarily non-hierarchical approach in past Forums has been a hallmark of their success, fitting with the peer-to-peer learning approach of each person being both learner and teacher, regardless of title or rank.

10. **Mixing and matching individuals and groups** is important, but can also be challenging, as there is a tendency for people to seek out the same chair/position in the room from session to session, to stay in proximity to the same people each day, etc.. Deliberately organizing sessions and activities to encourage comfortable ways of moving and mixing the participants has helped to foster more sharing and shared-experience between Forum attendees.

11. Building in **“process time” after key activities** (such as school/field visits), is important for participants who have experienced similar-but-different activities in smaller groups to talk about their observations, learning, recommendations, etc. in a plenary or mixed-group session. Process times give participants a mechanism for actively participating and for switching back and forth between teacher-learner roles. This in turn helps to distill learning and strengthen memories of the activities.

12. There are three important “non-negotiables” for Forum success:

- a. **Participant accommodations (hotel rooms) need to be affordable, comfortable and easily accessible** to the main site of the conference activities. Ideally, a variety of accommodation options ranging in style and price are available, on site or very close to the venue, but always within an affordable cost range and with services including internet, in-room or on-premises space for prayers, laundry services, a business center/printing services, and—ideally--room service. Many high-level participants also ask for suites or other set-ups where they can have small, private meetings.
- b. **Food needs to be adequate in quantity and quality as well as appropriate for a variety of cultural tastes/requirements.**
- c. **Informal and fun time needs to be included** at an appropriate moment in the Forum



schedule, preferably and evening with some universal music and dancing along with a good meal.

In past Forums, participants have enjoyed getting dressed up, having their group photo taken, as well as photos with old and new Forum friends, and then enjoying a lively, relaxed, evening of

eating and dancing (most often to popular African dance music).

13. **Attention to how energy waxes and wanes over the course of a week can help to keep participants’ attention when needed.** GCNF has learned that there is fairly typical pattern to participant energy changes from the time they arrive from a usually long international flight, pretty much strangers to one another and preoccupied with whatever they just left behind to come to the Forum, through relationship development, trust building, and heightened excitement, to conference fatigue and preparation for going back home and back to work. Planning sessions that factor in where the group’s energy is at any given time—and adjusting to energy needs if necessary—is critical for participation and learning.

14. Ensuring that participants have **products they have helped to create and can take home and use** can be rewarding during the conference, reinforce learning when participants are back at home, and can support participants sharing the experience with others. Participants in past Forum have drafted and approved a Communique, referring to the Forum experience and highlighting shared issues and actions for attention post-Forum. GCNF has also provided participants each year with thumb drives on which key Forum sessions and materials have been recorded. Post-Forum, GCNF posts Forum summary reports in electronic form (prior to 2018 GCNF produced hard-copy reports of Forum highlights).

15. **Time keeping and shepherding** is a thankless, but critical element because keeping to the schedule is important for participants and organizers alike. That said, if there is a burning issue in the room, it can backfire if organizers insist on a break or moving to other topics too quickly. Similarly, all groups need some clear reminders that sessions are about to start after a break, some indication when it’s time to move from one room to the other, help to navigate unfamiliar conference logistics, etc. How these things are signaled and by whom needs to

take into account the size of the group, the cultures represented, the types of competing activities and distractions in the participants' surroundings, etc. Too strict or harsh signals are generally not well tolerated by groups, but groups also do not respond well to a lack of discipline about timekeeping or the lack of attention to logistics and group movements.

16. Intergenerational and cultural dimensions can enhance participants' experience.



Cultural events depicting local traditions, sights, and sounds would presumably be appreciated by any conference group visiting a country, but school meal stakeholders seem to also be somewhat uniquely drawn to children and activities that involve children.

GCNF encourages countries hosting the Forum to consider involving children and young adults in the program. In addition to the highly-popular school visits, some countries have involved children in the opening ceremonies (generally performing a patriotic or cultural dance or musical number, speaking, or reciting an appropriate verse or passage; shown videos involving children; invited secondary-school or college students to serve as conference hosts and guides; etc. Not only are these activities popular, but nearly each Forum's evaluation results include suggestions by participants for future Forum to involve more children in meaningful ways.



17. Forum **evaluations** are not easy to elicit from participants, but do help to identify issues and participant interests and are useful for Forum planning.

Learning Exchanges Facilitated by GCNF

Country-to-country learning and South-South cooperation have long been featured at the annual Global Child Nutrition Forum and integrated into GCNF's other programs, with a growing focus on multi-tiered and multi-sectoral collaboration. Believing that the best way for countries to build durable, nutritious school meal programs is for program leaders and implementers to learn directly from their peers, GCNF began extending this approach beyond the Forum, through a Learning Exchanges program, formalized in 2017 in response to specific requests from partners in Southern Africa.

Learning Exchanges catalyze peer-to-peer sharing, using structured learning activities and tailored site visits. A carefully selected group of key players in the targeted school meal programs are invited to host and/or to visit one another's program. Each visit is designed with specific learning objectives and should build on and add to what has come before. The Learning Exchanges are intended to benefit both the hosting and the visiting participants and their respective programs by fostering joint problem solving and experiential learning. The visits may be complemented with meetings or conferences to further share and enhance the group's learning. Conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic require Learning Exchanges to use virtual formats (for visits, workshops, communications, etc.) to carry out the planned activities.



Whether between states or provinces within a country, or between countries with shared interests, the Learning Exchanges can provide insight into good practices and innovations to enhance programs. Learning Exchanges can:

- Help to fast track improvements in the involved school meal programs by expanding information sharing and problem solving within and between countries.
- Encourage collaboration between relevant public and private sector players (including relevant large-scale non-profit, non-governmental players).
- Identify innovations, practices, and research results relevant for school meal programs
- Identify and encourage governments and key partners to become leaders in the regional and global contexts of school meal programs.
- Improve and build on data collected at state/provincial and/or at national level.
- Strengthen state-to-state and country-to-country professional school feeding networks and alliances.
- Provide insight into program successes and challenges for key players in the host location as well as for visitors.

The first GCNF Learning Exchange began in India in 2018 and is still ongoing. It was undertaken to support state-to-state, and state-central government information sharing. By sheer scale, India has the largest school meal program in the world, yet it is too often absent from the global discourse. The national school meal program, known as the Midday Meals (MDM) Scheme, feeds about 100 million school children, covering 1.1 million schools on a daily basis. Founded in response to a court order as a “rights based” social development program of the Government of India, the MDM, among other things, seeks to address issues of food security, lack of nutrition, and access to education on a nationwide scale.

An early and important element of the India Learning Exchange was the implementation of a state-level survey of the MDM Scheme. Derived from the Global Survey of School Meal Programs[©], the state-level survey demonstrated differences in how states implement the MDM program and brought out examples of some successful innovations as well as some of the challenges being encountered by the responding states. The state-level survey and these examples have helped to guide decisions for in-person and virtual learning sessions, the technical topics to be covered, and more. Two graphics from the resulting report, *State Survey of School Meal Programs: India* (GCNF 2020) are provided below.

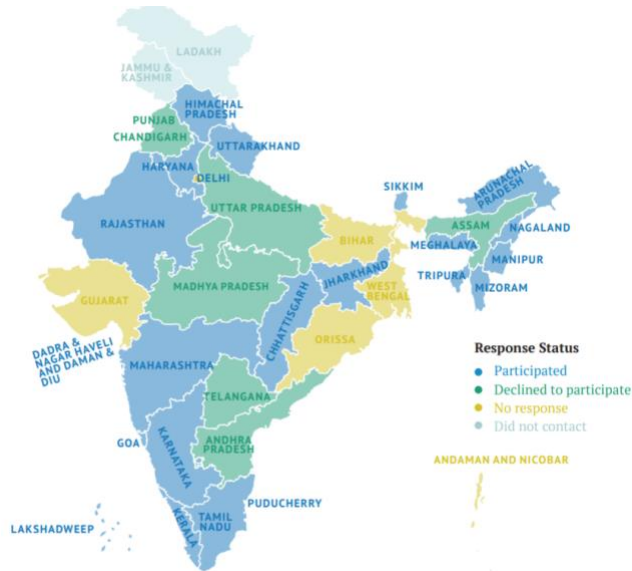


Table 8 Food items included in the MDM scheme by participating states

	Cereals/Cereals	Legumes/Nuts	Roots/Tubers	Green Leafy Vegetables	Other Vegetables	Fruits	Dairy Products	Eggs	Meat	Fish	Poultry	Oil	Salt	Sugar
Arunachal Pradesh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chhattisgarh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Haryana	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Himachal Pradesh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jharkhand	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Karnataka	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kerala	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lakshadweep	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Maharashtra	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Manipur	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meghalaya	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mizoram	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nagaland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rajasthan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sikkim	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tamil Nadu	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tripura	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Uttarakhand	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Survey respondents may not have understood what was meant by "legumes", resulting in some under-reporting of this category.

In general, through Learning Exchanges, GCNF aims to develop and strengthen sustainable professional networks between those working in and responsible for school meal programs. The Learning Exchange networks are not exclusive and evolve as more stakeholders become interested and form alliances to support a shared agenda of advancing school meal programs.

In India, this network is a collaboration between an Indian institution serving as GCNF's implementing partner, the World Food Program's India Country Office, Akshaya Patra, Manna Trust, General Mills, Inc., and others. The network is committed to fostering deeper engagement with the Central Government and State Governments and facilitates learning and sharing opportunities for the world's largest school meal program in national, regional, and global communities. The graphics below are from the report of a partner-supported inter-state workshop hosted by the Government of Kerala State.

INTER-STATE REGIONAL CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOP

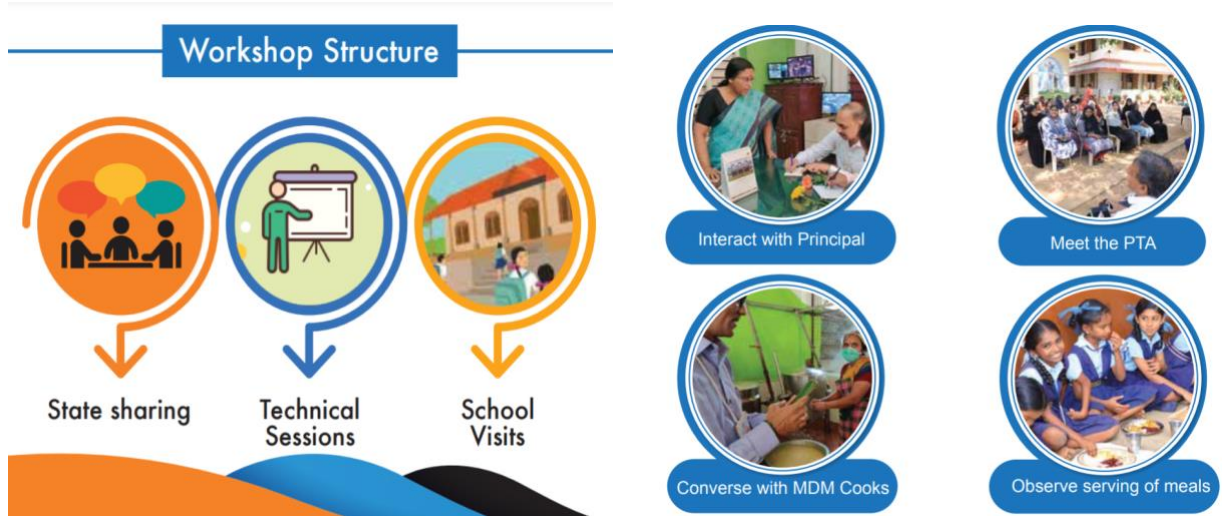
ON EMERGING BEST PRACTICES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME



Hosted by:
Government of Kerala
February 27 & 28, 2020



Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, Goa, Puducherry,
Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Andhra Pradesh and Lakshadweep



Ideally, the India and other school meal-related networks link to other networks and locations, and become a part of and contribute to efforts such as the Global Child Nutrition Forums, the Global Survey of School Meal Programs, and the School Meals Coalition.

Approaches: What works

Several lessons can be gleaned from Learning Exchange experiences to date.

1. **A common vocabulary, agreement on key indicators, and a core understanding of the policy framework** within which the involved programs are operating is helpful to participants as they are sharing, discussing, and learning during site visits, workshops, and other Learning Exchange activities.
2. Learning is stronger when the **activities are focused on a particular theme or a very limited set of topics** within the broader context of the program(s) showcased. School meal programs are complex and varied, which can lead to wide-ranging discussions and multiple topics being covered, dispersing attention and potentially lessening the impact of the learning activities. That said, even when designed to focus the participant's attention on a very narrow set of themes, there needs to be some attention to the broader context, particularly regarding any aspects of the programs that support or allow these "successes" or innovations to occur.
3. Learning Exchange visits and workshops work **best when conducted in-person**, with enough time allocated to allow for a variety of formal and informal activities to take place and relationships to develop. In-person visits are more expensive in time and money, however, than virtual visits and activities.
4. Learning Exchange **activities via virtual platforms work best when kept very focused and short** (90 minutes or less per session). They also require some form of attention-getting techniques (such as involving a very high-level or popular personality, including some



animated or video presentation, conducting a quiz or online survey during the session, etc.) to gain and keep the participants' attention.

5. **Virtual activities require attention to the invited/desired participants' technical capacity to participate.** Poor internet connectivity, old, or out-of-date software and hardware, lighting conditions, unreliable electrical supply, weather conditions, and more can distract or prevent participants from the learning activity. As virtual sessions have proliferated during the pandemic, competition for people's attention has grown, and there is also significant "virtual meeting fatigue". Nevertheless, much can be accomplished via virtual platforms when the sessions are well designed and competently delivered.
6. **The learning activities should not be "one-off" events.** The learning can be enhanced and relationships sustained with follow-up activities. These can be as simple as a follow-up call, email, or other communication providing a recording or notes from the session and/or bringing attention to the highlights of the learning activity, sharing additional information on the topic, asking for participant feedback, etc. More complex forms of feedback would require more extensive attention or information from the participant, and could include, for example, arranging pre- and post-activity quizzes to determine if learning took place, or requesting for videos or photos that indicate actions taken.

Tailored Study Visits and Virtual Exchanges Facilitated by the CoE in Brazil

Since its opening in 2011, the CoE has hosted more than 50 different delegations to experience tailored study visits to Brazil. It represents one of the fundamental tools of the CoE's country capacity strengthening program and of its partnership with the Brazilian government.

In this initial step of the collaboration, the visiting delegation learns about the Brazilian experience, policies and strategies, as well as aspects of program design, implementation and institutional coordination. The goal is not to duplicate the experience of Brazil elsewhere, but to give visitors the opportunity to see first-hand how the construction of national school feeding programs takes place. This can accelerate the process of designing and implementing the country's own school meals program, according to its own unique objectives and context.

Study visits also serve to mobilize governments and ensure political commitment, promote coordination between managers at local and national levels, and facilitate intersectoral relations. The visiting group is normally composed of various representatives, managers and technical advisors from key ministries (such as Education, Agriculture, Social Development, Planning, Budget and/or Finance) and the local WFP office.



The visit preparation starts around three months before the mission, to build an agenda tailored to their needs. The first part of the visit is dedicated to training sessions on the national programs, where countries can gain a broader view of the institutional mechanisms that make the Brazilian program work. The second phase of training involves field visits to family farming initiatives, cooperatives and schools in rural and urban areas.

The final stage of the study mission consists of planning sessions, where an action plan is consolidated. The structure is based on five quality standards for school meal programs, developed by the World Bank for the SABER framework (Systems Approach for Better Education Results). They evaluate the legal and policy framework, financial capacity, institutional framework, program design and implementation, and community participation. The methodology is participatory and multisectoral. Participants discuss the existing strategies and initiatives and define their goals and actions. During these discussions, the actors plan possible joint actions for the implementation of school feeding programs, with a focus on training activities.

Building upon a successful track records of hosting study visits and providing technical assistance, in 2019 the CoE began a change in the scope of work, designing a new structure with the attention of its team focused on a remote support program. The program is called “Virtual Exchanges” and focuses on the development of publications and technical information, production of videos, training and online courses for capacity building, in addition to assistance in the development of school feeding and food security policies - almost all done remotely. The initiative aims to scale up support to countries that may not have the resources to send a delegation, as well as to complement the in-person visits.

With the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020, the Virtual Exchanges methodology became even more relevant and was widely used to ensure the continuity of the support work provided by the Center of Excellence in Brazil. In this context, the Center of Excellence, with the support of the Brazilian government, launched in 2021 the “Virtual Study Visit: Brazil”. Aiming to present key points of the Brazilian experience in school feeding to governments and local WFP offices, the virtual tour supports countries that wish to continue their investment in development, even in a situation of global crisis. This virtual visit mirrors the learnings and methodology of an on-site trip to Brazil, making that experience accessible to an even wider audience.

This methodology created for the visits has been adapted throughout the years, according to the demands of governments and WFP country offices. It culminated not only in the Virtual Exchanges and the Virtual Study Visit, but also in exchanges among other countries within a South-South cooperation framework.

Approaches: What works

One of the central learnings from facilitating these study visits has been the importance of **collecting data and documenting countries trajectories and good practices**. Not only do they help other countries learn, but they also serve as a reference point to their advancement towards their policy goals. The **use of standardized frameworks** is very useful in this sense, as well as **simple, objective and practical content** that can support policymakers in their work.

Another key recommendation is to **jointly draft a roadmap, action plan or compilation of lessons learned with the partner country**. It's important that they go through the exercise of mapping and planning their strategy, so they can incorporate what they have learned from the technical exchange and leave with a **concrete and personalized set of next steps and priorities for their own country**.

A final lesson learned from the study visits is the importance of **engaging a broad variety of stakeholders in the exchanges**:

- **Vertically - combine high-level advocacy with technical support for policymakers in the different levels of government** and implementation hierarchy. **Matching them with their counterparts in other governments** can be very enriching for both sides and provide them with more targeted and useful information.
- **Horizontally - involve a diversity of actors that could be engaged in the promotion of food security policies**, such as different ministries (e.g. Education, Health, Social Development, Agriculture), civil society partners, international organizations, the private sector, parents and teachers' associations, etc. School feeding policies are stronger the more multisectoral they are, and countries should work to identify and include the participation of all relevant groups.



Standard Data and Shared Vocabulary – GCNF Global Survey of School Meal Programs©

Example: Country X and Country Y are debating a reasonable cost for school meal programs.

Country X thinks that USD.55 per day per child is not nearly enough; Country Y thinks that USD.55 is way too much.

This discrepancy may be because Country X only knows its own school feeding program that in school year 2018-19 involved a diverse menu of all locally sourced foods, focused on 200,000 children aged 6-9 receiving breakfast each school day at an average cost of USD.55 per day per child, and financed entirely by the national government. Country Y is thinking of its program but is talking about school year 2019-20 and 350,000 schoolchildren aged 6-12 receiving a monthly take-home ration that consists of vegetable oil and fortified corn-soy blend that costs an average of USD.15 per day per child and is entirely donated by an international donor. While only one school year apart chronologically and though the plans are for each child to be getting roughly an equivalent amount in kilocalories, there are enormous differences between the programs.



Peer-to-peer sharing and understanding is extremely difficult without a shared vocabulary and standardized measurements and datasets, a problem frequently encountered by school meal program stakeholders over the years.

Over the years, the United Nations and other international stakeholders developed some standard terminology and measures regarding modalities of delivering school food, food baskets, etc. Significant confusions have persisted, however; some still remain today. Because terminology and measurement options continue to evolve, standardized definitions and common measurements for some aspects of school meal programs are likely to remain elusive.

In 2017, GCNF set out an ambitious agenda: to implement a global survey, to gather a comprehensive set of data from all large-scale school meal programs in as many countries in the world as have such programs and to update the data periodically into the future. This required using standard definitions, a limited timeframe, the same core measures, and a standard and country-approved approach. It also required the survey to be descriptive rather than evaluative in order to encourage participation and allay fears that the survey respondents' programs were being judged.

GCNF took steps to ensure that this work was well-informed and that multiple stakeholders had the opportunity to review and comment on the design. GCNF conducted an extensive desk review to determine what information was already available, what data points were comparable across countries, what terminology was consistently used, etc.

It quickly became clear that few or no countries would have answers to all the questions GCNF wanted to pose. The decision was taken to nevertheless proceed with a very comprehensive questionnaire, on the theory that that considering those topics for which respondents currently have no answers might inspire them to begin to implement some of those interventions (such as, complimentary health or education activities, fortification, or recycling packaging) and/or to begin to measure them if they were implementing those things but were not accounting for them (e.g., school meal-related jobs were being created, but not were targeted to assist unemployed women or youth and/or the number and types of jobs were not being recorded).

GCNF also consulted with a wide range of stakeholders in designing, translating, and testing the questionnaire and glossary for the Global Survey of School Meal Programs© before the survey was rolled out globally.

Survey Topics



- Coverage of School Meal Programs
- Characteristics of Beneficiaries
- Food Baskets and Food Sources
- Funding and Costs
- Management and Implementation
- Health and Nutrition
- Infrastructure
- Agriculture, Employment, & Community Participation
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Program Sustainability
- Successes and Challenges

Beginning in January 2019, governments were asked to designate a focal point to complete the questionnaire, with assistance, if needed, from a GCNF survey team member. By December 2019 when the data gathering ended, just over 100 countries had responded, 85 of which stated that they had one or more large-scale school meal program and completed the questionnaire.

A three- to four-page country-specific report was prepared for each responding country and program, using a standard format and terminology, making it quite easy to compare programs and countries. In addition, GCNF entered the data into a global database, issued a summary report “School Meal Programs Around the World”, and made the data available free, on request. Examples of the first pages of two country reports are provided below, to demonstrate their comparability.

SCHOOL MEAL/FEEDING PROGRAM(S)

Most recently completed school year:
March 2018 - December 2018 (185 school days)

- Programa De Alimentación Escolar Del Ceip (PAE)

Lead Agency:
The National Administration for Public Education (ANEP)
Preschool and Primary Education Council (Consejo de Educación Inicial y Primaria)

NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES, AND STANDARDS

- National school feeding policy
- Nutrition
- Food safety
- Agriculture
- Private sector involvement

Line item in the national budget... Yes No NR

BUDGET

Total: USD 60,423,713

- National government: USD 60,423,713
- International donors*: USD 0
- Private sector: USD 0
- Other donors: USD 0

*Contributions by United Nations agencies or non-governmental organizations often represent funding from multiple donors.

INFRASTRUCTURE

All schools have electricity, latrines and bathrooms. Most schools have running and potable water, dedicated eating spaces/cafeeterias, and kitchens. Food is prepared on site (on school grounds) in 93% of the schools, and off site (by catering services) in other cases.

SPECIAL NOTES

2020 will mark the 100th anniversary of school feeding in Uruguay!

NR = No Response

MEALS/SNACKS/MODALITY

- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Dinner
- Snacks
- Take-home rations
- Conditional cash transfer

- Grains/cereals
- Roots, tubers
- Legumes and nuts
- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Meat
- Poultry
- Fish
- Green, leafy vegetables
- Other vegetables
- Fruits
- Oil
- Salt
- Sugar

Prohibited food items: Ultraprocessed and fried foods, those high in sugar and salt, sausages, and others per Ministry of Public Health guidelines.

FOOD SOURCES

- Purchased (domestic)
- Purchased (foreign)
- In-kind (domestic)
- In-kind (foreign)

COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

- Handwashing with soap
- Height measurement
- Weight measurement
- Deworming treatment
- Eye testing/eyeglasses
- Hearing testing/treatment
- Dental cleaning/testing
- Menstrual hygiene
- Drinking water
- Water purification

COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

EDUCATION

- Nutrition
- Health
- Food and agriculture
- Reproductive health
- Hygiene
- HIV prevention

OTHER

- School gardens
- Physical education

The checked and highlighted items are reported as required, though they may not be uniformly implemented.

= mandatory

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ORIENTAL REPUBLIC OF Uruguay

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

CHILDREN RECEIVING FOOD, 2018

School level	Total #	# Enrolled	# Receiving Food
Primary school	478,538	332,048	201,309
Secondary school	328,257	270,421	5,320
Total	806,795	602,469	206,629

NUMBER STUDENTS

3 years prior 1 year prior 2018

* Approximately 23% of those were pre-school children

COVERAGE: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Total number primary and secondary school-age children: 806,795

Receiving school food: 206,629

Food was also provided to some students in:

- Pre-schools
- Vocational/trade schools
- University/higher education
- Other

26%

Page 1, Uruguay's Country Report (GCNF 2019)

SCHOOL MEAL/FEEDING PROGRAM(S)

Most recently completed school year:
October 2017 - June 2018 (180 school days)

- National School Feeding Program/Government
- National School Feeding Program/World Food Program

Lead Agency: School Canteen Management Unit, Ministry of Education

NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES, AND STANDARDS

- National school feeding policy
- Nutrition
- Food safety
- Agriculture
- Private sector involvement

Line item in the national budget... Yes No NR

BUDGET

Total: USD 13,151,398

- National government: USD 1,800,074
- International donors*: USD 11,239,724
- Private sector: USD 0
- Other donors: USD 111,600 (local governments)

*Contributions by United Nations agencies or non-governmental organizations often represent funding from multiple donors.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Meals are prepared on site at schools, using wood or charcoal-burning stoves, either in closed or open-air kitchens. Most schools have storage, water, and utensils. Some schools have latrines; few schools have electricity or flush toilets. Food fumigation is common. School have gardens where it is possible to grow vegetables.

NR = No Response

MEALS/SNACKS/MODALITY

- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Dinner
- Snacks
- Take-home rations
- Conditional cash transfer

- Grains/cereals
- Roots, tubers
- Legumes and nuts
- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Meat
- Poultry
- Fish
- Green, leafy vegetables
- Other vegetables
- Fruits
- Oil
- Salt
- Sugar

Prohibited food items: Foods that do not meet nutritional and caloric standards or are culturally unacceptable

FOOD SOURCES

- Purchased (domestic)
- Purchased (foreign)
- In-kind (domestic)
- In-kind (foreign)

COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES

- Handwashing with soap
- Height measurement
- Weight measurement
- Deworming treatment
- Eye testing/eyeglasses
- Hearing testing/treatment
- Dental cleaning/testing
- Menstrual hygiene
- Drinking water
- Water purification

COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

EDUCATION

- Nutrition
- Health
- Food and agriculture
- Reproductive health
- Hygiene
- HIV prevention

OTHER

- School gardens
- Physical education

The checked and highlighted items are reported as required, though they may not be uniformly implemented.

= mandatory

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REPUBLIC OF Niger

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

CHILDREN RECEIVING FOOD, 2017-18

School level	Total #	# Enrolled	# Receiving Food
Primary school	3,991,447	2,768,305	150,811
Secondary school	3,114,856	786,582	42,490
Total	7,106,283	3,554,887	193,301

NUMBER STUDENTS

3 years prior 1 year prior 2017/18

COVERAGE: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Total number primary and secondary school-age children: 7,106,283

Receiving school food: 193,301

Food was also provided to some students in:

- Pre-schools
- Vocational/trade schools
- University/higher education
- Other

3%

Page 1, Niger's Country Report (GCNF 2019)

The survey served to guide presentations in the last three Global Child Nutrition Forums and provided data for special reports on how school meals (can) impact and/or involve human capital development, nutrition, lifelong health, fortification and biofortification, the food system, and inclusive economic development.

In overview, the survey

- **Provides a systematically updated view of the current state of school feeding programs** around the world.
- **Equips countries to advocate for their school meal programs with stakeholders** and to share survey data.
- **Facilitates knowledge sharing** among countries.
- **Identifies trends, strengths, and challenges.**
- **Strengthens country level data collection and monitoring.**
- **Provides data to the public in the global effort to strengthen research** on the child and adolescent health and development.



The Global Survey is also helping to cement and popularize standard definitions and descriptive measures for school meal programs. By capturing data from almost the same time frame, it further provides data that is relatively comparable in chronological terms as well.

The survey thus provides a platform for peer-to-peer discussions and comparisons of programs and interventions, a baseline for identifying gaps and tracking trends over time, and a tool for more informed decision making.

Approaches: What works

GCNF's Global Survey of School Meal Programs[©] experience is still young. Data gathering is underway for the 2021 survey (the second round), but several early lessons have emerged that are relevant to peer-to-peer learning and networking.

1. **Accurate explanations and translations of terms are extremely important;** language and nuance are important. How questions are phrased is important, and how to answer the questions has to be clear and relatively easy. Otherwise, respondents in different programs or countries will not understand the questions to mean the same things or will answer them in ways that cannot be compared. If peers are understanding things in different ways, they will not be able to communicate effectively with one another.
2. **Neutrality on the part of the data collector(s) is important.** The power dynamics between the people from whom data is sought and the political leaders, donors, and implementing partners seeking information, for example, can jeopardize the amount and quality of

information gleaned. There may be too much at stake for respondents to be comfortable providing data that the more powerful actor may not want to hear. Honest and as-complete-as-possible information is needed if peers are to interact successfully and learn from one another.

3. The non-evaluative approach is key to getting responses to the survey, but **neutrality is hard to maintain**. Stakeholder after stakeholder is tempted to use survey results to indicate that the programs are “good” or “bad”, an approach is “right” or “wrong”, and to make statements or decisions (such as funding decisions) based on the survey results. Countries are very sensitive to criticism, and programs are vulnerable to any negative reviews. Evaluative treatment threatens trusting relationships, and as previously noted, it takes time and experience to build trust, but it takes no time nor insight to destroy it.
4. **Involving as many peers and partners as possible in the design and implementation of the survey is not only advisable, it is critical**. This not only helps to build trust in the design, it is perhaps even more useful on the very practical level of getting the work done, involving the stakeholders as both teacher and learner, producing a positive peer-to-peer dynamic, and building long-term understanding and support for the survey and the results.
5. **Survey follow up is tricky but necessary**. People who take the time to share information need to be thanked for their efforts, and to see the fruits of their work. Ideally, they should be able to realize a direct benefit from participating.

Conclusion

A key factor in the particular power of peer-to-peer learning is the fact that true peers share similar challenges and responsibilities, hence similar motivations and interests. Recognition of these commonalities can lead to communications and activities that are collegial, hyper relevant, and credible, building empathy, understanding, and trust.

Trust is the single most important factor in peer learning and teaching, and a unique type of excitement emanates from peer interactions that are trust-based and working well.

Having shared that special excitement while working together and separately around the world with peer-to-peer learning models, WFP Centre of Excellence and GCNF are pleased to share their experiences, learning, and approaches in this paper.



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