

CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, SYSTEM-STRENGTHENING AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVES FOR HEALTHY DIETS AND GOOD NUTRITION TO REINFORCE THE NUTRITION-EDUCATION NEXUS

Nutrition Research Facility – October 2023

Both the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child¹ and the European Child Guarantee² are based on the fundamental premise that **every child should enjoy the same rights and live free from discrimination and intimidation of any kind**. As part of this strategy, the EU is firmly committed to support efforts to tackle child poverty and malnutrition while guaranteeing inclusive and universal access to quality health, education and social services for children everywhere.

As recognised by the EU Action Plan on Nutrition³, addressing the widespread child malnutrition in all its forms that persists in most low and middle income countries requires a multi-sectoral, holistic and coherent strategy. Going beyond a narrow focus on the immediate provision of food and nutrients, such strategies should: (i) span national food systems and food environments; (ii) strengthen convergence across a range of sectoral policies (health, education, water and sanitation, employment, social protection, etc.); (iii) develop the necessary infrastructure required in different sectors; and (iv) support socio-economic and political empowerment and engagement at individual, household and community levels. To ensure that no child is left behind, addressing intersecting inequalities such those relating to income, gender, disability and ethnicity, is also paramount.

Schools are increasingly recognised as important settings for initiatives to advance healthy diets and good nutrition, since most children spend a lot of time at school and are at an age when dietary habits are formed. Such comprehensive approaches need to be adapted to the specific context while at the same time addressing the vulnerabilities of those children who may not regularly attend school; along with any unintentional effects that may be detrimental to the quality of education.

School-based initiatives should take into consideration five main domains

Through a review of the literature, as part of the Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project of the European Commission, the Nutrition Research Facility has identified five core domains to consider for the design and assessment of food and nutrition programmes⁴. As presented in Figure 1, those include the school premises, the school community, the food environment around the school, education and school policies, as well as cross-cutting issues. Across those five domains, the review identified a number of key issues and indicators to take into account, as shown in Table 1.



© Anna Issakova, AdobeStock

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-action-rights-child_en

² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en#text=The%20Objective%20of%20the%20European,healthy%20meal%20each%20school%20day>

³ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6b8b10e4-c103-42d7-ae08-f8604ae8dfab/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

⁴ Nutrition Research Facility. April 2023. Identifying good practice indicators to assess comprehensive school food and nutrition programmes – A scoping review. Available at: https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/nrf_siaa_review_final_report_april2023.pdf

Figure 1. Five domains to consider for the design and assessment of school-based initiatives for healthy diets and good nutrition

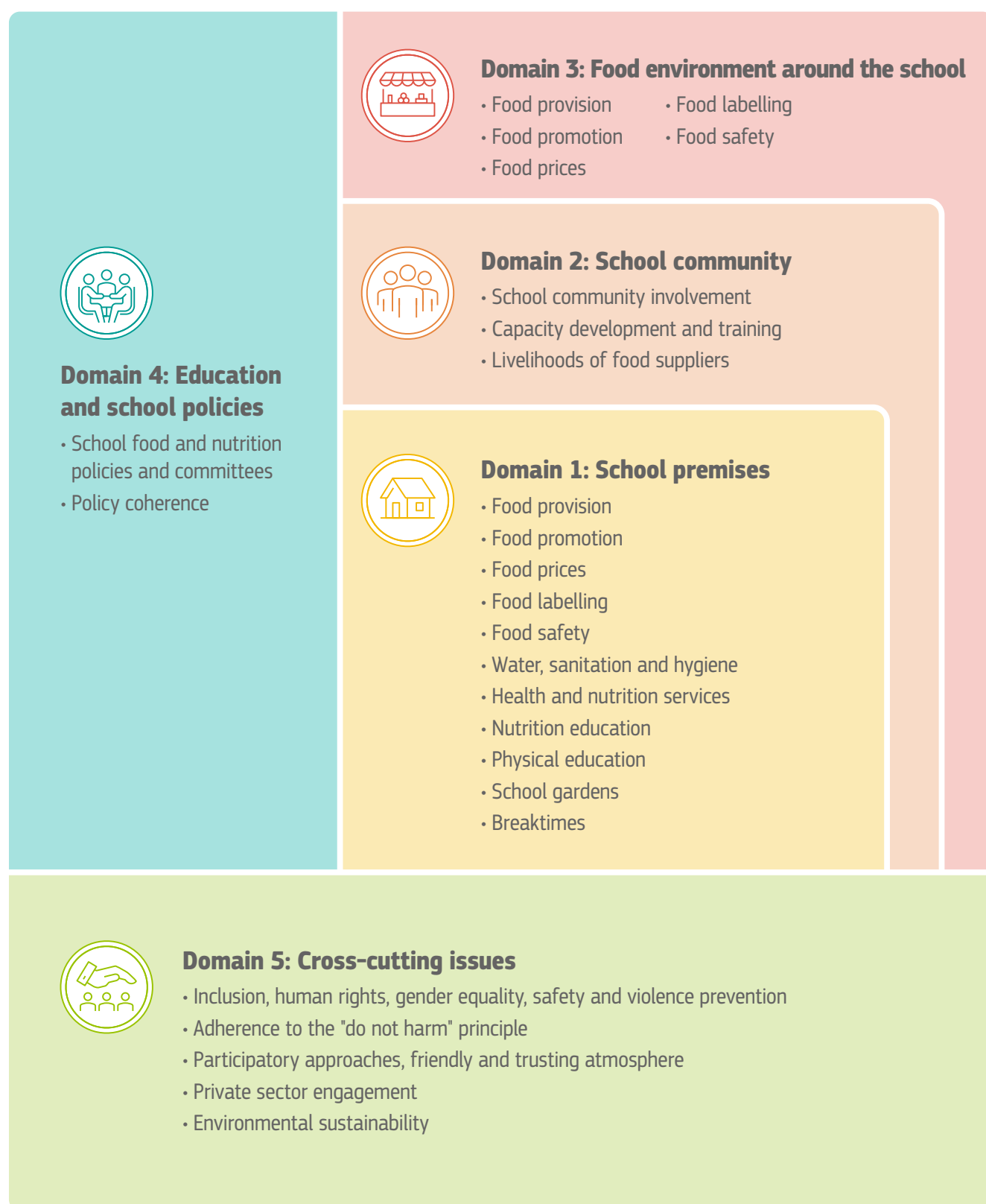



Table 1. Items and indicators to consider across five domains for the design and assessment of school-based initiatives for healthy diets and good nutrition

 Domain 1: School premises	
Food provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote healthy diets by increasing availability and access to a diverse range of minimally processed foods • Limit access to unhealthy foods or beverages • Ensure food procurement is as local, seasonal and culturally appropriate as possible • Provide access to adequate, safe, clean eating spaces
Food promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulate advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages • Promote healthy foods and diets using innovative and tailored communication tools
Food prices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax or manipulate prices at school to make unhealthy foods more expensive • Subsidise or manipulate prices at school to make healthy foods cheaper or free
Food labelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine menu board labelling system with nudges towards healthier options • Display easy-to-understand nutrition information
Food safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define food safety school standards in line with national food safety legislation • Ensure training and education of food handlers regarding food safety and hygiene • Ensure safety and hygiene in all areas where food is stored, prepared, sold and eaten
Health and nutrition services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver health and nutrition interventions through periodical visits or school-based health care staff • Set up referral systems and partnerships with local health services • Involve parents with information, counselling and feedback systems
Nutrition education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate culturally-appropriate food and nutrition education throughout the school system as part of classroom curricula and extra-curricular activities (such as school gardens or community activities) and ensure consistency with food provision • Include a range of topics in nutrition education, such as healthy eating practices, food systems and food environment
Physical education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide age-, sex-, disability- and culturally-appropriate physical education in the curriculum and opportunity for all age groups to access space and school sporting facilities for physical activity outside of the curriculum • Provide safe, spacious and clean spaces for indoor and outdoor physical activity • Ensure that physical education meets the needs and interests of all students and is tailored to boys and girls and associated with fun • Advocate for walking and/or cycling as forms of transport for school commutes
Water, sanitation and hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure easy and free access to safe drinking water • Ensure access to appropriate hand washing, personal hygiene and sanitation facilities • Make clean, age- and gender-appropriate sanitation facilities and products (including menstrual supplies) available and easily accessible to all pupils • Promote safe hygiene and sanitary behaviour
School gardens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use school or urban gardens as a learning platform for food and nutrition education • Grow nutrient-dense food in school gardens
Breaktimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure regular schedules and sufficient time for meals



Domain 2: School community

School community involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raise and build awareness about healthy diets in the wider school community• Ensure community mobilisation, ownership and involvement in programmes
Capacity development and training of the school community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen capacity of school staff, vendors and suppliers to implement nutrition-related activities• Make training manuals and guidelines available and accessible for staff• Provide health screening and free counselling for school staff
Livelihoods of food suppliers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Procure food from local farmers as far as possible• Strengthen the capacities of smallholder farmers to produce nutritious food• Incentivise value-chain actors to produce and process high-quality food for schools



Domain 3: Food environment around the school

Food provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limit exposure to unhealthy food in a perimeter outside the school premises through public planning laws
Food promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prevent promotion, marketing and advertising of foods, snacks and beverages high in energy, sugar, fat and salt around schools



Domain 4: Education and school policies

School food and nutrition policies and committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Put in place education and school policy addressing health-, food- and nutrition-related actions• Set up school committee including the whole school community to routinely discuss policy implementation and monitoring and ensure financial sustainability
Policy coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that school meals policy is aligned with education priorities and with social protection policies• Ensure that school food and nutrition programmes are fit for purposes and realistic, reach the most vulnerable ones and are complementary to other interventions



Domain 5: Cross-cutting issues

Inclusion and human rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take affirmative action against bullying, stigmatisation and discrimination • Ensure that all pupils, especially the most vulnerable ones, have access to education and to a full, healthy, free or subsidised meal in line with rights-based and inequality sensitive approaches
Gender equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure equal access to education, learning, activities and services for girls and boys • Encourage equal involvement of women in school food and nutrition programmes as cooks, farmers or programme managers without overburdening them
Safety and violence prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put in place rules and guidelines for staff and pupils related to physical safety, stigma and discrimination, corporal punishment of students by teachers, fighting and other forms of violence and sexual harassment or substance abuse • Train teachers to monitor, administer and teach first aid and basic safety
Adherence to the principle of “do not harm”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure that actions implemented in relation to school food and nutrition projects do not have negative impacts
Participatory approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve pupils in the design, development and implementation of school food and nutrition projects • Facilitate pupils-led projects on food and nutrition
Friendly, trusting atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote good and equitable relationships between school staff and pupils, families and the wider community • Promote open and dynamic communication and interactions between all school community members • Avoid overburdening communities, parents, teachers and school staff with participation in school food and nutrition programmes
Private sector engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor the involvement of private sector in school food and nutrition activities to ensure it promotes nutritious school meals • Avoid conflict of interest by preventing private sector to be involved in the design of school food and nutrition policy or to be part of the school committee
Environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote sustainable diets • Ensure environmental sustainability of food procurement as far as possible • Consider the use of traditional, neglected and underutilised foods • Set criteria for reducing food loss and waste • Encourage fuel and energy saving

School meals initiatives should take into consideration ten key points to support the nutrition-education nexus

The vision of “every child, every day, having a healthy meal in school by 2030” is promoted by the School Meals Coalition⁵ – joined by the EU in 2022⁶. **In the context of school-based initiatives for healthy diets and good nutrition, the provision of school meals, cooked and minimally processed in accordance with national food-based dietary guidelines and cultural preferences, also have the potential – when adequately resourced and implemented – to improve education outcomes such as enrolment, attendance and learning^{7,8}.** Furthermore, if food is locally sourced, school meals may be harnessed to empower local farmers and their communities while promoting the diversification of agricultural production.

However, it is critically important to ensure that increased investment in the provision of food does not have adverse effects on resources and capacities elsewhere in the education system or in other sectoral policies aimed at reducing inequalities⁹. Furthermore, it cannot always be assumed that school meals alone can address the multiple constraints affecting vulnerable children who may be unable to enrol or regularly attend school. In such cases, the right to food and quality education needs to be addressed via other policy measures and broader systemic reform. Against this backdrop, **Figure 2 provides ten key considerations to guide the design, implementation and assessment of school meals initiatives in support of a multi-sectoral nutrition-education nexus approach, to be sustained by necessary policy, capacity and financial commitments¹⁰.**

⁵ <https://schoolmealscoalition.org/>

⁶ This is in alignment with the European Child Guarantee which includes provision of a healthy school meal for every child each school day.

⁷ Tanika Chakraborty, Rajshri Jayaraman. School feeding and learning achievement: Evidence from India's midday meal program. Journal of Development Economics. Volume 139, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2018.10.011>

⁸ Elisabetta Aurino, Aulo Gelli, Clement Adamba, Isaac Osei-Akoto, Harold Alderman. Food for thought? Experimental Evidence on the Learning Impacts of a Large-Scale School Feeding Program. Journal of Human Resources. Dec. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.58.3.1019-1051SR1>

⁹ As acknowledged in a recent [Financial Landscape Analysis](#) undertaken jointly by the Education Commission and, Sustainable Financing Initiative and School Meals Coalition

¹⁰ As highlighted by UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, 2023. Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381965>

Figure 2. Ten key considerations to guide the design, implementation and assessment of school meals initiatives in support of a multi-sectoral nutrition-education nexus approach



- Food is consistently provided in appropriate quantity and quality (aligned with national food-based dietary guidelines), in the respect of cultural preferences, using minimally processed and local products
- Food safety standards are clearly defined and consistently met, drinking water is available all-year-round, pupils and staff have access to adequate sanitation facilities as well as safe and clean eating spaces, and staff preparing food are properly trained and equipped regarding hygiene and sanitary issues
- School meals are made available to all pupils whether via free or subsidised provision based on their right to food
- Risks of exclusion and discrimination are proactively measured and addressed, including the identification of factors affecting children currently unable to enrol or regularly attend school and the implementation of proactive measures to address them (e.g. school stipends)
- Human resources are adequate and robust local management capacities and systems are in place to ensure efficient, appropriate and reliable procurement and delivery of school meals without negatively impacting the quality of education
- Implementation does not exacerbate existing gendered responsibilities and workload of women and girls and, to the extent possible, contributes to a gender transformative approach
- Adequate and functional mechanisms, such as school committees, are in place to enable participatory decision-making, ownership and accountability for the staff, pupils, families and community representatives
- Programmes are embedded with comprehensive and coherent education policy frameworks that address nutrition and health across the curriculum (including nutrition and physical education; safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene) while ensuring community engagement and taking into account the food environment affecting children and their families outside school
- Rigorous comparative cost-benefit analysis of school meals relative to other important policy measures to improve the diets, nutrition and educational outcomes of school age children are undertaken
- Budgetary implications of sustainable domestic financing of school meals programmes are closely monitored and transparently analysed so as to ensure no potentially negative impact on other areas of expenditure across the education sector as well as the social sector more broadly

To cite this policy brief:

Nutrition Research Facility. (October 2023). Context-specific, system-strengthening and rights-based approach to school-based initiatives for healthy diets and good nutrition to reinforce the nutrition-education nexus (Policy brief).
https://www.nutrition-research-facility.eu/IMG/pdf/nrf-school_nutrition_initiatives_2023.pdf