

Preface

Investing in human capital—the sum of a population’s health, skills, knowledge, and experience—can strengthen a country’s competitiveness in a rapidly changing world. Building human capital prepares workforces for the more highly skilled jobs of the future, which can drive more sustained growth and transform the trajectory of economies.

Human capital matters—for people, economies, societies, and for global stability. And it matters over generations. When countries fail to invest productively in human capital, the costs are enormous, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable people. In a recent report, World Bank economists (Lange, Wodon, and Carey 2018) estimate that human capital wealth is the largest component of the overall wealth of nations, and its relative importance increases as countries develop. In low-income countries, human capital accounts for 41 percent of total wealth, but in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 70 percent of national wealth is attributed to human capital. Investing in people is one of the smartest economic investments that countries can make.

Effective investments should be done throughout a child’s path—from early age to adulthood—for each to achieve full potential. A recent analysis by the University of Washington’s Disease Control Priorities Project (Jamison and others 2015–18) shows that the first 1,000 days—from conception to age 2—are critical for survival and development. A continuing focus on the next 7,000 days—from ages 2 to 20—is also necessary to

help young people develop the cognitive and socioemotional skills they need to succeed.

Investments in human capital are multidimensional and complementary. Time and time again, our experiences show that health and education are two sides of the same coin, and investing in one requires simultaneous investment in the other. While building human capital depends on quality education, good health and nutrition are also required for children and adolescents to be able to participate and learn in school. When we improve the health and nutrition of schoolchildren, we transform the rest of their lives. Children who are well-nourished learn more, and as adults they earn more and are more productive. That transformation carries through to the next generation with the improved health of their own children, creating a long-term cycle of economic growth and progress.

WHY SCHOOL FEEDING

Analysis shows that a quality education, combined with a guaranteed package of health and nutrition interventions at school, such as school feeding, can contribute to child and adolescent development and build human capital. School feeding programs can help get children into school and help them stay there, increasing enrollment and reducing absenteeism. Once children are in the classroom, these programs can contribute to their learning by avoiding hunger and enhancing cognitive abilities. The benefits are especially great for the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

As highlighted in the World Bank's 2018 *World Development Report* (World Bank 2018), countries need to prioritize learning, not just schooling. Children must be healthy, not hungry, if they are to match learning opportunities with the ability to learn. In the most vulnerable communities, nutrition-sensitive school meals can offer children a regular source of nutrients that are essential for their mental and physical development. And for the growing number of countries with a “double burden” of undernutrition and emerging obesity problems, well-designed school meals can help set children on the path toward more healthy diets.

In Latin America, for example, where there is a growing burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), school feeding programs are a key intervention in reducing undernutrition and promoting healthy diet choices. Mexico's experience reducing sugary beverages in school cafeterias, for example, was found to be beneficial in advancing a healthy lifestyle. A large trial of school-based interventions in China also found that nutritional or physical activity interventions alone are not as effective as a joint program that combines nutritional and educational interventions.

In poor communities, economic benefits from school feeding programs are also evident—reducing poverty by boosting income for households and communities as a whole. For families, the value of meals in school is equivalent to about 10 percent of a household's income. For families with several children, that can mean substantial savings. As a result, school feeding programs are often part of social safety nets in poor countries, and they can be a stable way to reliably target pro-poor investments into communities, as well as a system that can be scaled up rapidly to respond to crises.

There are also direct economic benefits for smallholder farmers in the community. Buying local food creates stable markets, boosting local agriculture, impacting rural transformation, and strengthening local food systems. In Brazil, for example, 30 percent of all purchases for school feeding come from smallholder agriculture (Drake and others 2016). These farmers are oftentimes parents with schoolchildren, helping them break intergenerational cycles of hunger and poverty.

Notably, benefits to households and communities offer important synergies. The economic growth in poor communities helps provide stability and better-quality education and health systems that promote human capital. At the same time, children and adolescents grow up to enjoy better employment and social opportunities as their communities grow.

SCHOOL FEEDING IN TIMES OF FRAGILITY AND CRISES

School meals are especially critical for children who live in areas of fragility, conflict, and violence. Globally, 489 million people who suffer from hunger live in conflict zones. Even in informal educational settings, these programs meet basic hunger needs and protect the future of the world's most vulnerable children.

School feeding programs also provide a sense of normalcy in traumatic circumstances. In fragile and conflict-affected states, where food insecurity and fragility are mutually reinforcing, school feeding becomes an essential part, not only of humanitarian assistance, but also of the hope for a more peaceful future.

Well-designed programs should, therefore, be part of the crisis response in normalizing communities and peace-building. Similarly, well-designed programs in stable communities should be able to provide an “adaptive response,” where programs can rapidly expand to include additional beneficiaries when there is a downturn, ensuring that food is targeted directly to the children who need it most, when they need it most.

PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE WORLD BANK GROUP AND WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

The World Bank Group and World Food Programme are committed to working together and with partners in supporting and developing innovative approaches to scale up school feeding.

This book details the latest evidence and analyses available on the impact of school feeding and healthy nutrition for children and adolescents. We hope it will serve as a call to action for a more coordinated effort to tackle food security, education, and health—with the goal of galvanizing support and improving the efficiency and quality of national school feeding programs. Failure could sentence millions of children to lives of poverty and suffering, but success can lead to a more stable, peaceful, prosperous world, where all children have a chance to thrive and reach for their highest aspirations.

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