



WORKING PAPER

# School Meals Case Study: Kenya

Prepared by the Research Consortium for School Health and  
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# Historical background

School meals in Kenya are considered an important safety net for children from food-insecure households and communities. The school meals programme was envisioned as a national sustainable initiative that would boost key educational indicators including enrollment, retention, transition rates and food security among school going children from food insecure regions and communities. This case study provides an insight into Kenya's school meals programme from its initiation with highlights on Nutrition and Food Security, design and implementation of the Programme, legal and policy frameworks and lessons learned.

## Country profile

### Population and economics

The Kenyan population is 54 million, and about 24.5 million are children under 18 years. Table 1 presents Key data on Kenya's population and economic sectors<sup>1,2,3</sup>.

*Table 1: Kenya population and Gross Domestic Product*

Total population (2022)	Total number of population aged under 18 (2023)	Total number of population employed in the agriculture sector (2022)	Gross Domestic Product per capita (2021)
54.03 Million	24,428,416	17.63 Million (32.63%)	2,069.66 USD

### Education

Since independence, Kenya has had three educational curriculums. In 1967, the 7-4-2-3 consisted of 7 years in primary school, 4 in secondary, 2 years in high school and 3-5 years of university education. In 1985, it was changed, and the structure was based on the 8-4-4 system which adopted eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education and four years of university education. In 2002, the government of Kenya introduced Free Primary Education to all public schools. The current education system is the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) under the 2-6-3-3 system of education unveiled in 2017, a learner-centered approach focusing on developing critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills. Basic education has been organized in three levels: Early Years Education, Middle School Education, and Senior. All learners must take two core subjects (Community Service Learning, and Physical Education) irrespective of their desired pathways. The three main pathways are i) Arts and Sports Science, (ii) Social Science, and (iii) Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The number of students in public primary schools and those on school meals is presented in table 2.

Table 2: Number of students in public primary schools versus those on school Meals

Total number of students	Total number of schools	Average class size	Number of children involved in school meal	Percentage of children eligible for free school meals
8,000,000	23,000	50	2,651,615	100%

The national examination that determines a child's academic future has been moved from grade 8 to grade 9 where the decision on career progression (STEM or Social Science or Arts & Sports) is made. At least 40% of a student's grade is determined through regular assessments by the teachers and the rest is from a national examination. The vision is to shift learning away from memorization to demonstration of seven major competencies: communication and collaboration, self-efficacy, critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy and learning to learn. The first cohort of students under the CBC system of education will join universities in 2029<sup>4</sup>.

Gender segregation in Education in the primary schools showed that enrollment of boys (5,142,775) was higher than girls (4,934,053) in 2020 with a gender parity index of 0.96 thus a gender disparity in favor of boys<sup>5</sup>.

## Food security, nutrition and health

The Government of Kenya is strongly committed to reducing hunger and malnutrition guided by the Food and Nutrition Security Policy which provides an overarching framework covering the multiple dimensions of food security and nutrition improvement<sup>6</sup>.

**Food insecurity:** The prevalence of undernourishment in 2021 was 28%<sup>7</sup>

**Stunting children from 5 to 19 years :** N/A

**Micronutrient deficiency from 5 to 14 years:** Anaemia (16.5%), vitamin A deficiency (3.6%), marginal VAD (33.9%), zinc deficiency (80.2%)<sup>8</sup>

**Thinness in children from 5 to 19 years:** 11.9% for boys, 8.1% for girls<sup>9</sup>

**Overweight in children from 5 to 19 years :** 21.3% for boys, 19.0% for girls<sup>9</sup>

**Obesity in children from 5 to 19 years:** 9.0% for boys, 6.0% for girls<sup>9</sup>

## Design and implementation of the school meal programmes

### Description

The Kenya school meals journey began in 1979 when the government introduced a school milk programme dubbed "Maziwa ya Nyayo" through the late President Moi to mitigate the effects of a severe drought that occurred that year and the high levels of malnutrition among school children. This was a precursor to the regular school meals programme initiated in 1980 by the

Government of Kenya with the support of the World Food Programme (WFP) where 240,000 children were getting meals that year. The main objective of the programme was to address short-term hunger and promote enrollment and retention of children in school. The programme aimed to attain Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Education For All (EFA) which was adopted in 2003<sup>10</sup>.

Kenya experienced the worst drought in 40 years in 2021/2022. Against this backdrop, the President identified the national school meals programme as a flagship strategy and a critical safety net to reach, protect and build the resilience of Kenya's most vulnerable population; particularly in the arid, semi-arid lands, informal urban settlements and among the refugee population. The government made an unprecedented domestic investment and doubled the budget for school meals from USD 15 million to USD 35 million in the 2023/2024 financial year. WFP started the process of handing over the programme to the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2008 to transition to a more sustainable nationally supported programme and reduce reliance on external assistance. To achieve this, the government launched the Home Grown School Meals Programme (HGSMP) also referred to as the cash transfer model in 2009. In this programme, cash from the national treasury is transferred to participating schools through the MoE to purchase food commodities from local smallholder farmers and other local suppliers for school meals for children in semi-arid regions of Kenya. The gradual handing over of School Meal Programme (SMP) to the government was completed in June 2018 with a total of 1.6 million children in over 4,000 schools receiving a hot lunch through government funding<sup>10</sup>.

The school meals programme is implemented by the MoE through the National Council for Nomadic Education in Kenya (NACONEK). This is a Semi-Autonomous Government Agency (SAGA) in the state department of Basic Education in the Ministry of Education. The National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy 2017-2022<sup>11</sup> launched in 2018 provided the foundation for the design and implementation of school meal programmes in Kenya.

Schools in Kenya are either public or private, in urban or rural areas and with different socio-economic backgrounds. In this regard, different **modalities of implementation** have been adopted to fit the different contexts (*see section Food procurement*).

## Objectives

The following are the strategic objectives of Kenya's school meals programme<sup>11</sup>:

- To increase awareness and intake of adequate, locally available and nutritious food among school children and other communities,
- To improve the enrollment, attendance, retention, completion and learning of school children with equity,
- To promote local and inclusive development,
- To develop and implement a sustainable national school meals and nutrition programme,
- To promote partnerships and multi-sectoral coordination for complementary support and effective implementation of the school meals and nutrition programme,
- To strengthen governance and accountability in the implementation of the school meals and nutrition programme.

The objectives of the HGSFP concern two main areas as described below.

**Education-related HGSM objectives:**

- Increase school enrollment
- Stabilize pupil attendance and concentration
- Improve gender parity
- Improve transition and completion rates
- Contribute to improving health and nutrition status of children

**Agriculture-related HGSM objectives:**

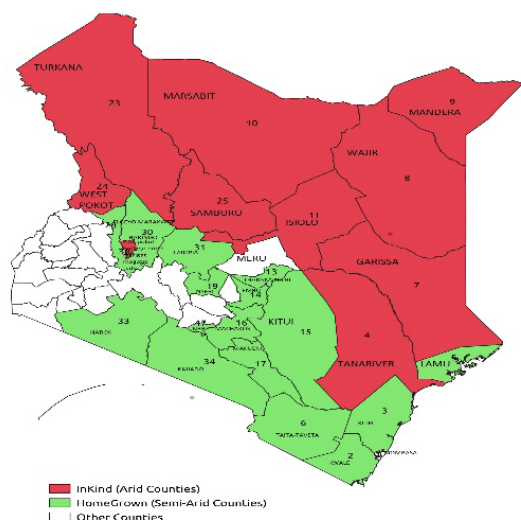
- Link school feeding to local agricultural production
- Increase smallholder farmers' access to school feeding market
- Encourage improved climate-smart production practices among smallholder farmers
- Increase direct purchases from smallholders

## Coverage

The SMP has grown to 2.6 million children in the 2023/24 financial year (table 3). Kenya committed to the Global School Meals Coalition to achieve universal climate smart school meals programme by 2030 by scaling up to 10 million children through domestic investment.

*Table 3: Distribution of learners by school meals modality*

SMP modality	Number of schools	Number of Pupils
Cash Transfer	2,009	545,865
Fortified Meals	2,136	446,173
In-kind	4,501	1,659,577
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,646</b>	<b>2,651,615</b>



The In-kind (centralized model) is implemented in 11 arid counties, refugee camps, and urban slums while cash transfer (HGSFP) is implemented in 14 semi-arid counties. In addition, an expanded SMP is usually done whenever there are droughts or floods in areas that get affected by food insecurity, usually neighboring the arid and semi-arid counties on advice from the National Drought Management Authority (Figure 1). The centralized kitchens feed about 450,000 learners in 1,000 schools across seven counties including Nairobi one.

*Figure 1: Counties benefiting from School meals programme with in-kind and HGSFP modalities*

## Targeting

Targeting for the SMP is based on geographical area considerations (sub-location level), low educational indicators in terms of school access and retention (enrollment, completion, and attendance rates), food insecurity, and the state of malnutrition of learners in the particular sub-location. The target beneficiaries for the national SMP are children aged 6-14 years in public primary schools in grades 1-9. In the semi-arid areas, schools in pockets of poverty are targeted while all public primary schools in the arid areas are beneficiaries of the SMP. Children in the ECDE are under the county governments; therefore, their meals and other learning facilities are usually provided by the county governments.

Food for Education's centralized model targets specific counties and learners in public primary schools, ECDE, and junior secondary school learners for schools that are within the primary school compound. The learners targeted are between 4 to 15 years with the majority coming from urban informal settlements.

## Meal types

The In-kind/centralized model provides rice, beans, vegetable oil and salt to schools in arid counties and refugee camps while fortified meals are provided under the expanded programme, in areas with high levels of malnutrition and informal urban settlements. The long-term plan for NACONEK is to transition from rice and beans in the arid and refugee camps to "githeri" (a mixture of maize and beans) or other hot meal alternatives depending on available budget and community acceptance. Porridge will be maintained as a complementary meal for regions with high dropout rates and high prevalence of malnutrition.

The food basket for HGSFP comprises of cereals (150 g), pulses (40 g), vegetable oil (5 ml) and iodized salt (5g)<sup>12</sup>. Schools are expected to provide meals according to availability and affordability. To improve the nutrient content of the food, MoE in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and development partners have developed menu guides that will support school managers and school meal committees to provide diverse and balanced meals within the available budgets. The menu guides contain recipes that will support the provision of nutritionally adequate diets to children aged 4-18 years in public, private or partner-supported school meal programmes. In the future, meal selection is envisaged to follow climate-smart principles in all the models and clean cooking to be established in all the models. The menu for the centralized kitchens comprises rice and beans, green grams, or lentils supplemented with cabbage and carrots.

## Nutritional norms

According to the National School Meals and Nutrition Strategy, schools may provide a mid-day meal or a snack to children depending on the objective of the intervention. In addition, a ration should be nutritionally appropriate, socially appropriate and acceptable, practically feasible and attainable. School meal rations should contain sufficient amounts of carbohydrates, proteins and fats and should include sources of micronutrients such as fruits and vegetables.

The HGSFP ration provides 706 kilocalories, 23 grams of protein, and 11 grams of fat per pupil per day; a third of the daily nutritional requirement for a growing child. If porridge is provided as

a mid-day meal, 40 grams of flour is used per child. School gardens are encouraged to supplement the daily rations and parents/well-wishers are encouraged to donate additional foodstuffs, especially fruits and vegetables. In addition, locally fortified foods are encouraged<sup>12</sup>.

The centralized kitchens provide each child with approximately 550 grams per meal of high protein, high carbohydrates, vegetables and fruits.

## Food procurement

Procurement of food for the school meals programme is guided by the Public Procurement and Assets Disposals Act (2015). However, local sourcing from smallholder farmers is encouraged to promote agricultural development and cut down carbon emissions incurred over long-distance transportation of food. Procurement of food for the in-kind modality is done centrally at the national level and the food is distributed to the beneficiary schools. Local sourcing of food for the HGSFP is done by the school meals committees in the schools through tendering procedures.

Different **modalities of implementation** co-exist within the country.

- **The centralized modality:** In this model, procurement of food is done at the national or county level and the food is distributed to schools for preparation. This model is used by the MoE through the in-kind provision of food to schools that are situated in areas where food supply chains are not well-established or efficient. These are areas with inadequate production and supply of food and where decentralized procurement would be difficult to implement, mainly very remote areas and the arid regions.
- **The decentralized modality:** In this model, cash is transferred from the national government to the local level such as devolved government units, schools, community committees or other stakeholders. The recipients of the funds are responsible for the procurement of food items, storage, preparation of meals, and management of the programme through established guidelines. This is the modality that is adopted by HGSFP.
- **The community-based modality:** This modality encompasses the following options: parents may contribute food or money for meal provision and oversee its implementation; parents may contribute a specific amount of cash to the school for the meals as part of the school levies especially among privately schools; parents pack food for their children to eat at lunchtime at school. School gardens may supplement the existing food supply where possible.
- **Mixed modalities:** The different modalities may overlap, for instance, a school may receive cash transfers from the national government for local procurement of food and receive in-kind donations of food from the community at the same time.
- **Centralized kitchen model:** This model is more recent and is implemented by a development partner known as Food for Education (F4E) in collaboration with county governments including Nairobi County through the “Dishi na County” school feeding programme. Food is prepared in over 100 central kitchens with a capacity of up to 60,000 meals referred to as hubs then it is packed, transported, and served to learners in the various schools and early childhood development centers (referred to as spokes) within a 20 km radius. This is achieved through cost sharing between the parents and a subsidy by the county government and partners.

NACONEK is piloting the aggregator model to substitute cash transfers by procuring food directly from the aggregators (farmer-based organizations) and distributing it to schools. The in-kind will be maintained in areas of food scarcity, while centralized kitchens will be introduced to cover 200,000 learners in six counties.

For centralized kitchens, central procurement is used where large volumes of food are sourced from a pool of quality-tested aggregators to secure the best prices and quality. The food is stored in the storerooms until when required for preparation.

## Legal framework and public policy evolution

The Kenyan school meals legal and policy framework is anchored within the Kenyan constitution (2010), article 46: *'every person has the right to be free from hunger and have adequate food of acceptable quality.'*

**Kenya National Food and Nutrition Security<sup>6</sup>** policy calls for coordinated efforts to improve children's nutrition through school meal standards that cater for the energy, protein, vitamin and mineral requirements for the biological changes as well as optimal growth and development of older children and adolescents.

**The school health policy<sup>13</sup>** guides the implementation of comprehensive school health programmes and calls for the provision of healthy and nutritious meals in schools, school gardening and linkages with the local community for school meal provision as well as regular monitoring of nutrition status and referral of malnourished children for care and management.

**The national school meals and nutrition strategy<sup>11</sup>** provides a framework for implementing school meals and nutrition initiatives in Kenya. It highlights various modalities for the implementation of school meal programmes and provides for food procurement guided by the Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Act. It also provides guidelines for school meals baskets and school meal funding mechanisms.

The school meal programme is coordinated by a multi-stakeholder/multi-sectoral committee which includes government departments, development and implementing partners and the private sector (Annexe 2).

**The national healthy diets and physical activity guidelines<sup>14</sup>** highlight that school meals should provide nutritious meals from at least three to four food groups, including a staple, protein-rich food and fruit/vegetables. It also encourages schools to integrate nutrition education and food production in the curriculum and provide nutrition screening and growth monitoring in schools.

**The Kenya Kwanza Manifesto 2022<sup>15</sup>** committed to provide compulsory lunch time meals in all schools from pre-school to tertiary level and compulsory daily fruit for all students across all levels of education while the budget policy statement in 2023 called for doubling the amount of money allocated for school feeding programmes to increase the number of beneficiaries from 2 to 4 million.

## Cost of implementation

The cost of meals per child per day is estimated at 28 Kenyan shilling (Ksh) (Table 4). In the centralized kitchens model, the cost per meal is approximately Ksh 30 and parents contribute half of this cost while F4E subsidizes the other half. Partnerships with county governments such

as Mombasa County have enabled F4E to further subsidize the cost of meals to an extent where parents of children in ECD centers pay zero for their children's meals.

*Table 4: Cost analysis of school meal at national level.*

Number of children	2,651,615
Average cost of a meal (Ksh)	34
Cost of raw material (%)	100
Labour costs (%)	0
Family participation	0
City budget per child and meal (Ksh)	0
Government budget per child and meal (Ksh)	28
Number of teaching days per year in one academic year	180
Number of school meal days in one academic year	180

Ksh: shilling Kenyan (1 USD = 128 Ksh in October 2024).

## Financing

The budget allocation for the year 2022/23 was 3.8 billion which rose to 5.2 billion in 2023/24. The current allocation (2024/25) is 3 billion against a requirement of 14 billion. The national school meal programme is solely financed by the government of Kenya through domestic funds. Funds are released from the national treasury to the MoE which facilitates cash transfers to HGSE schools and does central procurement of food for the In-kind programme. Development partners that support school meals including F4E seek funding from external sources and donors.

## Monitoring and evaluation

Data on enrollment and uptake is collected by field officers within the Department of Basic Education and school administration. It is useful for budgeting, and obtaining feedback on SMP implementation and recommendations for improvement. Monitoring the SMP is done through:

- Regular assessments with continuous monitoring and evaluation to assess the programme's impact on nutrition and educational outcomes.
- Feedback mechanisms established to address any issues promptly and make necessary adjustments.

## Lessons learned and best practices

- Community Involvement: Successful programmes often involve the local community in planning, implementing, and monitoring. This ensures that the meals meet local dietary preferences and cultural practices more so in the semi-arid areas.
- Policy Support: Strong policy support and funding from the government have supported the school meal programmes and helped to enhance their impact.

- **Centralized Kitchens:** The centralized kitchens have led to operational and cost efficiency through sourcing large volumes of food from local aggregators thus economies of scale.

Several best practices were identified in distinct areas.

- **Local Sourcing:** Procuring food locally through cash transfer has supported the local economy, ensured fresher ingredients, and promoted climate-smart agricultural practices.
- **Nutrition Education:** Integrating nutrition education into the school curriculum helps teach children about healthy eating habits. In addition, involving parents in nutrition education will help reinforce healthy home practices.
- **Partnerships:** Multi-sectoral collaboration with NGOs, international organizations, and private sector entities has brought in additional expertise, resources, and funding. Collaborating with local organizations and community groups helps to enhance programme reach and effectiveness.
- **Innovative Approaches:** Using biofortified food commodities such as iron-rich beans in some of the cash transfer counties and fortified foods such as the corn soy blend porridge will help combat micronutrient deficiencies among learners.
- **Targeted Interventions:** This ensures that the most vulnerable children, such as those from low-income families or marginalized communities, are prioritized and that children with specific dietary needs are catered for.
- **Capacity Building:** This entails providing regular training for cooks and school staff on nutrition, hygiene, and food handling and empowering the local communities to take over the management of the programmes in the long term.
- **Tap2Eat Technology:** This is a payment platform used by F4E in centralized kitchens that allows parents to pre-pay through mobile money to an online account. Each child in the programme wears a wristband that is tapped on a digital device whenever a meal is served and a cashless payment is made. It enables parents to pay weekly or monthly, facilitates real-time data-driven decision-making, and can track a child's school attendance and transition over time. Monetary contributions by parents have supported the sustainable scale-up of the programme.
- **Climate-friendly school meals:** Kenya is implementing climate-smart SMP through interventions such as the aggregator model of food procurement which promotes local sourcing therefore cutting down carbon emissions occasioned by long haul transportation of food supplies; development of a plant-based menu guide for schools; and clean cooking technologies. NACONEK is piloting steam cooking technologies in six schools intending to scale up to more schools. The carbon credits that will be generated will be sold to carbon markets and proceeds will go towards enrolling more learners in the SMP for sustainability and to achieve universal coverage.

# Challenges

At policy and decision-making level, the challenges include increasing emerging vulnerabilities such as droughts that necessitate the need for expansion of school meal programmes. Increased food prices lead to higher budgetary requirements and insufficient budget to cover all school days.

At school and learner's levels, school meal provision challenges include:

- inadequate funding to purchase and provide adequate diverse nutritious meals
- poor quality and monotonous diets
- seasonality leading to food price fluctuations and unavailability of some food items (e.g vegetables)
- inadequate SMP infrastructure and facilities including kitchen and cooking equipment (modern/traditional), dining spaces and handwashing stations
- water shortage and rationing
- inadequate space, skills and equipment for school gardening.
- In addition, government SMP only covers public schools leaving out children in low-cost private schools in vulnerable neighborhoods such as the urban settlements<sup>16</sup>

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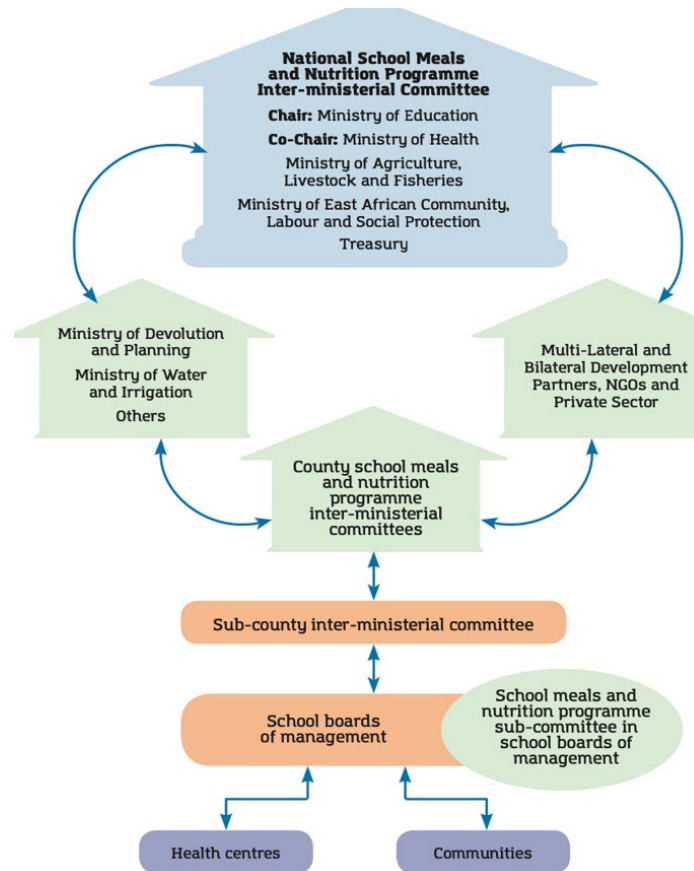
# Annexes

## Annex 1: Policy reforms

The government has undertaken policy reforms to align education with constitutional provisions on equality and non-discrimination. To align the education sector with Article 27(3-8) under the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, legislations have been enacted by Parliament to establish the necessary legal and regulatory framework for comprehensive education reform. The Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012 aimed to harmonize education with the constitutional provisions and laid the groundwork for key Acts of Parliament in 2012 and 2013, which were instrumental in driving policy reforms such as reducing gender parity. At the secondary education level, the situation changes. The GPI in enrolment surpasses 1, signifying a higher enrolment rate for girls. This trend has grown over the years, with the GPI reaching around 1.04 by 2022 indicating gender disparity favoring females. The GPI in enrolment for university education shows an advantage for boys, but this gap has been decreasing over the years. For example, by 2022, the GPI had increased to around 0.84, indicating reducing the gender gap in university enrolment. The Gender Parity Index in secondary school and university is not within the acceptable range of between 0.97 and 1.03, implying that there is gender disparity in access to secondary education favoring girls and university enrolment in favor of boys.

**The Gender lens:** Comparing the transition rate from primary to secondary level education, a higher proportion of girls successfully moved from one educational level to the next compared to boys. In 2020, both genders experienced a significant increase, with boys at 91.9% and girls at 90.0%. However, in 2021, there was a considerable drop, with boys at 77.4% and girls at 79.5%. By 2022, there was a slight recovery, with boys at 76.7% and girls at 80.5% indicating girls still have a higher transition rate compared to boys. Kenya has made progress in achieving gender parity in its education system, with successes in areas such as pre-primary and primary education. However, gender disparities persist in secondary and tertiary education. Initiatives such as Free Primary Education (FPE) and a 100% transition from primary to secondary education have contributed to this progress. Yet, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in certain areas such as technical and vocational education still reflects male dominance. Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) remains crucial, as it has direct implications on academic performance and the overall well-being of students.

## Annex 2: The school meals coordination framework



*Figure 1: School meal coordination framework  
(source: National school meals and nutrition strategy)*