

Scaling up and improving nutrition in Kyrgyzstan's school meals programme



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Introduction

The Kyrgyz Republic (KR) is a landlocked country in central Asia with a population of 6.2 million people. The country's nutrition situation has been steadily improving over the last decade, with a reduction in the prevalence of iron-deficiency anaemia in women of reproductive age and children aged 0-5 years (CU5), as well as a decrease in CU5 stunting from 23% in 2009 to 13% in 2014¹. However, high levels of micronutrient deficiency (particularly anaemia and iodine deficiency) persist, pockets of high stunting prevalence remain in some regions (for example; 21% in Djalal-Abad and 16.4% in Naryn provinces) and there is an emerging problem of overweight in CU5 (7% in 2014)¹. Wasting is relatively low, estimated at 2.8% in 2014. It is also estimated that 43% of school-aged children in KR have iodine deficiency and 32% are affected by vitamin A deficiency¹.

Despite gradual improvements in the economy and a fall in poverty rates, poverty still affects a quarter of the population, especially in rural areas and among women and children. Poverty is linked to the low level of food security as the poor spend 68% of their budget on food. Food insecurity in the country is seasonal; it also correlates with poverty affecting 25% of the general population and 32% of children.¹ Dependency on food imports is also increasing, which makes domestic food prices susceptible to international price fluctuations.

Optimising the school meals' programme

Since 2013, WFP has worked with the Kyrgyz government and multi-sector partners to improve the national school meals programme (SMP), in line with international quality standards. To date, 450 pilot schools have introduced improved school meals, representing 15% of schools and reaching 113,000 primary school children across the country's seven provinces. Under WFP, Kyrgyzstan's new Country Strategic Plan (2018-2022) will see 350 more schools receive financial and technical support to improve their meals.

Such support includes: providing technical assistance to schools, including assistance in the reconstruction and re-equipment of school kitchens/canteens and the water and

sanitation infrastructure; introduction of new nutritious menus; training of staff (management and cooks); and follow-up on daily menus. Partners have worked to develop national policy on school nutrition, as well as developing national capacity for the effective management of the SMP. The programme supports the replication and institutionalisation of diverse and nutritious meals in all primary schools for grades 1-4 (children aged 6-9 years old).

One of the main improvements to school meals has involved replacing the traditional 'bun and cup of tea' with a wide range of recipes and menus that meet nutrient requirements, including hot porridges, soups and salads. Fortified wheat flour is also provided for making baked goods. School cooks have been given training in meal preparation.

Financing school meals

Despite the limitations of the state budget, KR has allocated funds for organising meals for students at a rate of 7-10 Kyrgyz soms (US\$0.10-0.15) per child per day since 2006, a total allocation of 620,000,000 soms (US\$10,000,000). The government also covers the salaries of the cooks and kitchen assistants (total spend on the SMP amounts to 2% of the state education budget).

The interest in and prioritisation of child nutrition in KR has also resulted in significant support from local authorities for the programme, such as funds for renovation, maintenance and other costs related to the operation of the canteens. The Kyrgyz programme is unique in its integrated approach and joint effort by the state, WFP and the local communities, whereby communities/parents not only contribute to the organisation of meals, but also closely monitor and manage the process. Parents and local businesses participate in menu design, cooking, food procurement, spending tracking, monitoring food quality and sanitary requirements, as well as raising and following up on issues that arise.

Working with multiple sectors

The programme recognises the need to work with other sectors, such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), to

¹ Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) Kyrgyzstan, 2014.

maximise nutrition gains. Improvements to infrastructure include cold and hot water, sewage systems and toilets. School kitchens are provided with modern kitchen equipment in order to prepare hot meals and food is prepared and consumed in hygienic conditions, in compliance with national sanitary norms. Training in sanitary practices is provided for all members of the school community, including interactive games for children on nutrition and hygiene.

Agriculture, or more specifically a 'farm-to-school' approach, is another important component of the programme. Promoting and supporting school farms and gardens to grow food helps to reduce the cost of school meals and to better control the quality of incoming agricultural produce. At present, around 85 schools have farms and gardens that not only are of benefit to meals, making them cheaper and more diverse, but in some cases are also a source of income to help address additional school needs. Furthermore, this system allows enhancement of local economies by creating job opportunities for farmers, strengthening the local market and allowing business opportunities for local communities.

Community involvement

The involvement of the local communities (and sometimes village committees) as well as parents and grandparents in the programme is a crucial component. Daily monitoring and follow-up, involvement in the management of the meals (such as collection of funds and purchase of additional products), daily overseeing of the quality of the food, and support to the daily running of the SMP are an indispensable part of the process and a key success factor for programme sustainability.

Parental and community engagement is also a critical instrument in advocating for the importance of the school meals with government and potential donors. Parents are also best placed to provide arguments on the benefit of their children's right to healthy nutrition.

Programme challenges

The main challenge for implementing improved school meals are the high costs of the programme, particularly the initial investments such as refurbishment. Around 25% of the schools lack proper infrastructure, including adequate water supply, sanitation and buildings, to organise meals on a daily basis. Renovation and equipment of the schools require large financial investments. Even with the involvement and commitment of the local government, delays and restrictions in the allocation of the funds are often observed. WFP and local communities address these issues by lobbying and supporting administrative processes for budget allocations and by seeking alternative funding sources, such as private donors, local entrepreneurs and non-governmental organisations.

The state allocations for meals are not high enough to provide nutritious and varied food. The WFP-supported diversified menu, while taking into account locally available ingredients and prices to make the best use of available funds, still requires additional contributions from parents, usually around 4 soms (US\$0.05) a day per child in cash or in-kind (fruits and vegetables of a family's own production, or transfers). The process of collection and management of the funds is not always smooth and equally well accepted. Working with the parents and local communities is essential



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not only for generating support for funding, but also for the practical organisation and management of collecting funds and budget-keeping.

Lessons learned and next steps

The implementation of optimised school meals involves a number of laws and regulations relating to nutrition requirements, food safety and hygiene standards, procurement regulations, construction and engineering requirements, and many other requirements. As the work has unfolded, many gaps and inconsistencies have been revealed as many of these documents have not been updated for years or did not exist before. Revising such essential policy and normative frameworks is time-consuming and work-intensive. This is the challenge of leading a programme in two parallel directions – implementation and policy support. Regular follow-up is a crucial aspect of successful implementation and the school meals programme needs effective coordination to make sure that all stakeholders are in line with programme developments and participate accordingly.

Next steps are for the Ministry of Education, with support from WFP, to develop alternative models of school meal organisation and cost efficiency for those schools that lack the infrastructure to provide hot meals – around 500 schools across the country.



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