



IDF position on supporting the nutritional needs of children: The important role of milk and dairy foods in school meal programmes

Executive summary

Over 160 million children around the world currently receive and benefit from school milk programmes. School Milk programmes have been recognised for over a century for their contribution to nutritional adequacy, health, and learning. Milk and dairy products are nutrient-rich, easy to consume, highly palatable, affordable, and often locally produced.

In addition to providing milk and/or dairy products, these programmes help to foster a better understanding of dairy products, including where they come from, how dairy products are made, their nutritional composition, and how they fit into overall diets.

In September 2021, the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), convened by the UN Secretary-General, brought governments, organisations and people together to transform the way we produce, consume and think about food. The Summit resulted in a few concrete actions, including the establishment of the School Meals Coalition, which aims to ensure, through school meal programmes, that 'every child has the opportunity to receive a healthy meal every day in school by 2030'.

Dairy provides crucial nutrients which contribute to nutrition security and should therefore be a key component of school meals. Additionally, milk, cheese, and yoghurt provide essential nutrients that support optimal growth, bone health and overall health.

School meal programmes are a significant safety net for children. As one of the primary means for children to have access to healthy meals, they help combat poverty and malnutrition. Their impact on education is seen in increased engagement from students. In countries that experience armed conflict and food insecurity, school meal programmes can also serve as an incentive for families to send their children, especially girls, to school, thus supporting female empowerment and children's rights to education, nutrition, and well-being (Burbano et al., 2018; Verguet et al., 2020).

These food access programmes play an important role as a community solution for nutrition adequacy, which supports children's health and their ability to learn. Research suggests that consuming nutrient-dense foods that are readily available in school meal programmes such as fruit, vegetables and dairy products — is associated with improved academic and health outcomes among children and adolescents (Verguet et al, 2020). The 2021 Global Nutrition Report showed that worldwide, close to 150 million children under five years of age are stunted, around 45 million are wasted and almost 39 million are overweight.

On the other hand, national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) are government-endorsed and/or developed documents intended to provide context-specific recommendations and advice on healthy diets and lifestyles for adults and children older than five years.



Aligning FBDGs with the latest evidence on healthy eating, and the wider social, economic, and environmental implications of dietary choices is therefore an important starting point to enable policy coherence and creating a food environment that contributes to good public and personal health. To ensure a healthy next generation, our children must have a good nutritional start every day. School meal programmes are an effective way to promote optimal growth, development and health as well as support academic performance in children when aligned with national FBDGs or locally recommended, evidence-based nutritional guide-lines as they aid in the prevention of nutritional deficiencies, limit the risks for chronic diseases and promote the general health of all learners (Burbano et al., 2018; Verguet et al., 2020).

The dairy sector understands the role that milk and dairy foods play in supporting the health of children worldwide and shares information through the IDF School Milk Knowledge Hub and School Milk Bulletin. By partnering with organisations across all levels – from local and regional to national and global – the dairy sector can empower stakeholders to understand the evidence-based need for incorporating policies and programmes, such as school milk programmes and milk and dairy foods in school meal programmes, to support children’s access to nutritious foods.

References

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