

## SCHOOL FOOD AND NUTRITION IN URBAN AND PERI-URBAN KENYA: INSIGHTS FROM POLICY TO IMPLEMENTATION

Nutrition Research Facility – January 2026

### Schools can play a key role in addressing adolescent malnutrition

Adolescence is a pivotal stage for shaping healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime and for mitigating any effects of earlier childhood malnutrition. Throughout Africa, children and young people face the dual challenge of undernutrition and a rising tide of overweight and obesity, a trend partly linked to the growing availability and consumption of ultra-processed foods and other unhealthy dietary patterns. A key driver is that the majority of Kenyans (around 80%) are unable to afford a healthy diet<sup>1</sup>. These issues highlight the urgency of targeted, evidence-based food and nutrition programmes in schools as part of broader national efforts to improve diet quality, address all forms of malnutrition, and lower the long-term risk of non-communicable diseases among adolescents.

School food and nutrition programmes (SFNPs) are widely recognised for having the potential to support students' health, learning, and well-being. However, evidence on their direct impact on nutritional status remains mixed, underscoring the need for stronger design, implementation, and monitoring mechanisms. In Kenya, national policies have acknowledged the importance of such programmes, but implementation remains irregular. There are significant gaps not only in data on the reach and impact of SFNPs, but also in understanding their relevance, quality, and coherence within the broader nutrition and education policies. Addressing these gaps requires a stronger evidence base to inform policy and programming, rather than the mere introduction of new interventions. Strengthening the design and effectiveness of existing school food and nutrition policies, guided by sound data and local realities, will be key to ensuring their contribution to healthier diets and adolescent well-being. At the same time, it should be noted that, at national level, only around half of Kenyan children enrol in, and even fewer complete, secondary education – highlighting important limitations in the reach of school-based initiatives for this age group<sup>2</sup>.

### Evaluating school food and nutrition programmes in Kenya

As part of the European Commission's Knowledge and Research for Nutrition project, the Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) undertook a study of school nutrition policies and their implementation in urban and peri-urban Kenya. It sought to address several key questions:

- Which national policies currently support adolescent food and nutrition at school?
- What types of programmes are being deployed in schools?
- What are the challenges and barriers to effective implementation?

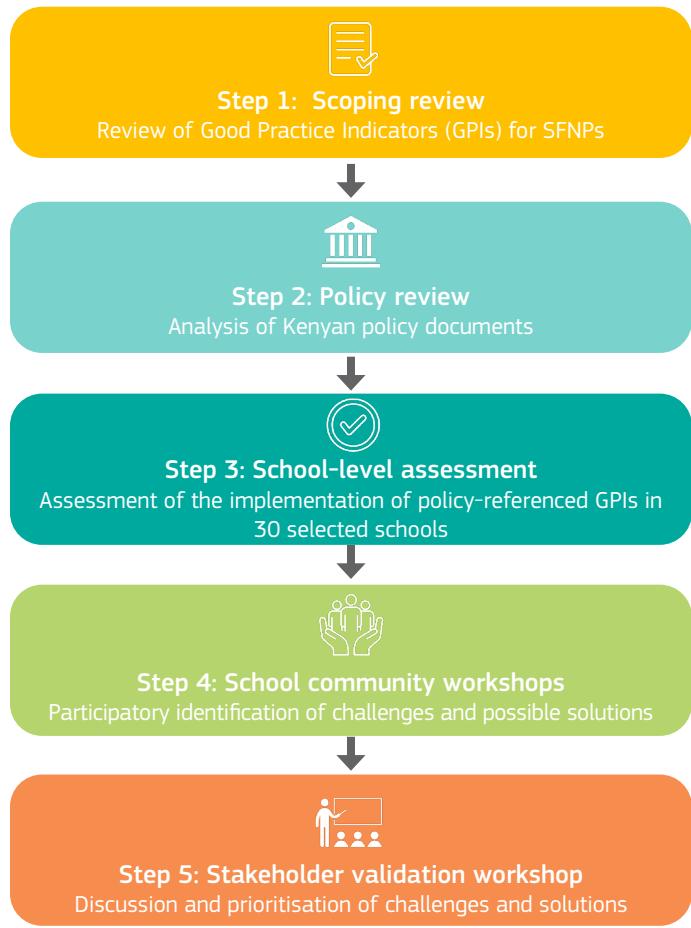
- What solutions can be explored to improve the quality of adolescent diets and support national efforts to address all forms of malnutrition?

The study was conducted in five stages (Figure 1).

### From policy to practice: assessing School Food and Nutrition Programmes in Kenya

In Step 1, a [scoping review of the international literature](#) identified 58 Good Practice Indicators (GPIs) to assess SFNPs grouped within five key domains: school premises, school community, external food environment, policy environment and cross-cutting issues (Figure 2).

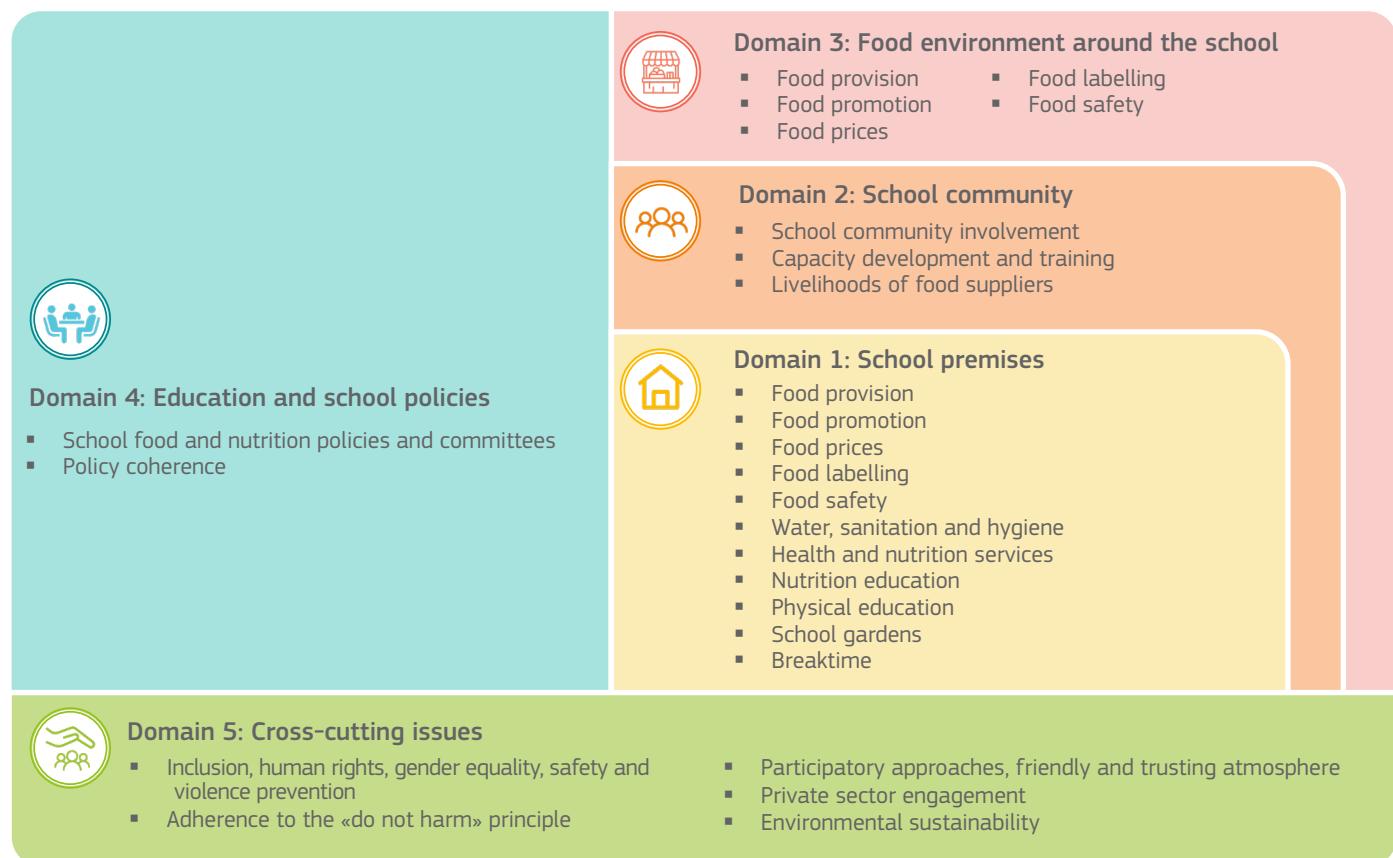
Figure 1: Overview of the research process for assessing School Food and Nutrition Programmes (SFNPs) and their implementation



<sup>1</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2024. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024 – Financing to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms. Rome.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. (2020). UNICEF Kenya Country Kit 2020-2022. UNICEF Kenya. <https://www.unicef.org/kenya/media/1951/file/UNICEF%20Kenya%20country%20kit%202020-2022.pdf>

Figure 2: Five domains to consider for the design and assessment of school-based interventions for healthy diets and good nutrition



The review of Kenyan policy documents (Step 2) highlighted 38 of these GPs that were fully or partially addressed. Components such as food safety, school health, and nutrition education were generally well integrated into existing policies. However, components such as food provision, promotion of healthy foods (regulating the advertising of unhealthy foods/beverages in schools), physical education (ensuring activities are inclusive and appropriate for both girls and boys), school gardens (ensuring nutrient-dense foods are produced) and school policy environment (food and nutrition policies are in place) were only partially addressed. Components such as food pricing (taxing or subsidising prices in school) and food labelling (menu board nudges, nutritional information in canteens) were largely absent. Likewise, the external school food environment received little policy attention.

Although national policies in Kenya reference SFNPs, a significant gap between policy intent and implementation at school level was observed. Out of the 38 GPs referenced in Kenyan policy documents, assessment at the level of 30 selected schools<sup>3</sup> (Step 3) found that only 10 were fully implemented, 20 were partially implemented, 2 were not implemented and 6 could not be assessed in this study. For example, despite policies promoting the provision of healthy foods, many schools continue to serve poor quality meals with limited diversity, and insufficient quantities. Although the importance of nutrition education was frequently highlighted in policy documents, schools reported limited exposure of students to the topic, a lack of teaching materials and insufficient numbers of trained staff. Interestingly, 3 GPs that were not mentioned in policy documents were found to be fully or partially implemented in schools (access to safe, clean and adequate eating spaces; use of fresh food grown in school gardens; and setting up a policy integrating actions on food and nutrition at school level).

A total of 35 workshops with the school community (teachers, students, caterers/food vendors and parents) (Step 4) revealed several challenges affecting the implementation of SFNPs and helped identify corresponding solutions, presented in Table 1. The main concerns were related to domains 1, 2 and 5 and included poor food quality and diversity, fluctuating food prices, inadequate school infrastructure; limitations in water, sanitation, and hygiene; low engagement in school gardening activities; insufficient food safety measures; lack of inclusive physical education activities. These challenges are compounded by inadequate or inconsistent financing for SFNPs, constraining implementation capacity and the sustainability of proposed actions. In most Kenyan secondary schools, families bear the cost of meals, a financial barrier that contributes to inequities in diet quality and limits the reach of school-based nutrition interventions among adolescents, particularly in low-income urban and peri-urban settings.



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<sup>3</sup> Secondary schools were selected across six sub-counties from Nairobi (urban) and Kiambu (peri-urban) counties. Those schools were selected through a combination of random and purposive sampling to capture a range of socioeconomic contexts and school types (public/private, day/boarding, single-sex/mixed).

Table 1: Key challenges and solutions related to implementing SFNPs identified during school community workshops (Step 4)

Domain 1: School premises		
	Challenges	Solutions
<b>Food provision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate amounts of food</li> <li>Lack of diet diversity</li> <li>Poor food quality</li> <li>Lack of consideration for special needs of students</li> <li>Inadequate dining spaces, kitchen and food storage spaces</li> <li>Delayed and poor quality of procured food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce midmorning and afternoon snacks</li> <li>Involve students and school community in menu planning</li> <li>Improve food quality by training catering staff and regular inspections</li> <li>Develop larger food infrastructures</li> <li>Ensure quality control measures in food procurement</li> </ul>
<b>Food labelling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of standardised guidelines for meal composition</li> <li>Inaccessible information about menu and nutritional content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement a standardised menu by the Ministry of Education's nutrition department</li> </ul>
<b>Food safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate hygiene practices by food handlers</li> <li>Poor food handling and preparation</li> <li>Inadequate food storage facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement comprehensive food safety standards and regular staff training</li> <li>Improve cooking facilities to ensure food safety</li> <li>Invest in modern storage facilities</li> </ul>
<b>Food prices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High food prices</li> <li>Challenges with fee payment from parents</li> <li>Lack of government support for meal programmes in private schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government should regulate food prices, provide subsidies, and increase funding for school meals</li> <li>Establish school gardens</li> <li>Struggling parents should contribute to school meals by providing food items instead of monetary payments</li> </ul>
<b>Physical education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of trained staff, equipment and motivation</li> <li>Limited time and space for activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employ physical education specialists, procure equipment, and raise awareness about the importance of physical activity</li> <li>Community involvement to create an environment for activities</li> </ul>
<b>Water, sanitation and hygiene</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Water scarcity</li> <li>Inadequate handwashing facilities</li> <li>Insufficient toilets, and poor garbage disposal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alternative sources such as boreholes and rainwater collection</li> <li>Investment in infrastructure, maintenance, and education on proper hygiene practices</li> <li>Community involvement and government support in provision of clean water and sanitation facilities</li> </ul>
<b>Nutrition education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited exposure to nutrition education in schools</li> <li>Lack of teaching materials, resources, and trained teachers, particularly in private schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools can engage nutrition experts to teach students and collaborate with local health facilities to provide nutrition talks and services</li> <li>Improve access to resources</li> </ul>
<b>Health and nutrition services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor uptake of health and nutrition services by students and parents</li> <li>Limited capacity</li> <li>Lack of financial and technical resources</li> <li>Lack of in-school clinics or nurses, relying instead on nearby health facilities for sick students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Construct and staff school clinics</li> <li>Collaborate with government facilities for health services</li> <li>Increase access to health professionals and resources</li> </ul>
Domain 2: School community		
	Challenges	Solutions
<b>School community involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents are mostly engaged in academic matters, such as discussing school performance and finances, but less so in health and nutrition activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involve parents more in decision-making processes for school nutrition programmes</li> </ul>
Domain 5: Cross-cutting issues		
	Challenges	Solutions
<b>Social Inclusion and human rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many lack essential facilities like ramps and accessible toilets.</li> <li>Pregnant and parenting adolescents face challenges like absenteeism and poor performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in essential facilities to support students with physical disabilities.</li> <li>Provide counselling services</li> </ul>

## Key recommendations to improve School Food and Nutrition Programmes in urban Kenya

During a final national workshop (Step 5), 31 key stakeholders – including representatives from national and subnational government bodies, as well as local and international non-governmental organisations working in school food and nutrition – gathered to discuss and refine the main challenges and potential solutions. Their collaborative effort resulted in the following recommendations:

- Advocate for sustained political support, as well as human and institutional investment in training, capacity strengthening and improved coordination mechanisms;
- Ensure that dedicated financial resources are allocated specifically for those adolescents attending secondary schools via SFNPs;
- Increase government funding for school meal programmes to improve the quality and adequacy of meals provided;
- Provide subsidies for food production, procurement, and transport to stabilise costs and reduce the impact of fluctuating food prices on school meal programmes, while ensuring that such support prioritises low-income schools and families least able to afford meal contributions;
- Implement fiscal policies to increase taxes on unhealthy foods,

using the revenue to support school meal programmes;

- Promote the creation of school gardens using innovative, climate-smart and resource-efficient farming techniques;
- Strengthen multisectoral collaboration by involving key government departments such as agriculture, nutrition, water and sanitation to support SFNPs.

## Conclusion

Strengthening SFNPs is an important pathway to improving adolescent health and well-being in Kenya, but their effectiveness depends on coherent policy frameworks, realistic financing, and sustained multisectoral support. This study highlights key gaps between policy design and implementation and identifies potential opportunities for further dialogue to enhance programme quality, equity, and reach, within existing fiscal constraints. Continued collaboration among governments at all levels, schools, and communities will be essential to ensure that limited resources are translated into effective and sustainable action.



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### For more information

<https://www.nutrition-research-facility-studies.eu/School-Interventions>

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