ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability



Rolling out Sustainable School Meals:

A guide for African Cities







SCHOOLFOOD 4CHANGE

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ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
GCNF	Global Child Nutrition Foundation
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
HGSF	Home-Grown School Feeding
MDA	Ministry, Department or Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SF4C	SchoolFood4Change
SFP	School Feeding Programme
SFWG	School Food Working Group
WSFA	Whole School Food Approach

1. Introduction and objectives

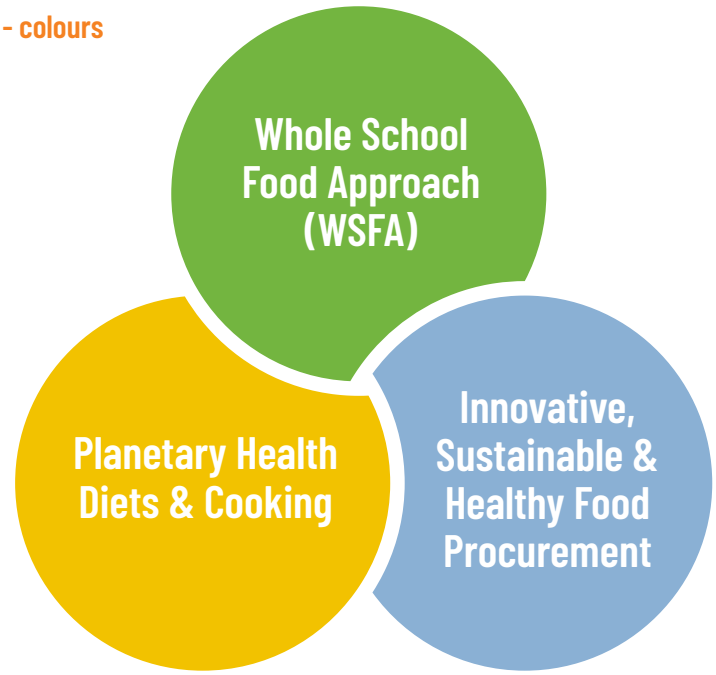
This guidance aims to offer **practical recommendations** for cities wishing to explore the transformative potential of SF4C's Triple Approach – including the Whole School Food Approach, Planetary Health Diets & Cooking and Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement.

Based on the experiences and lessons learned from SF4C cities and other organisations involved in the project, this document should help all interested cities and schools better understand **what steps are needed** to start putting **SF4C actions** into practice.

2. Navigating this guidance

The following chapters of this guide provide an overview of key aspects related to sustainable school feeding. Chapter three provides an overview of School Feeding Programmes (SFPs) in Africa, highlighting both achievements and existing gaps. Chapter four focuses on the importance of sustainable school meals, while chapter five introduces the SchoolFood4Change Triple Approach, exploring each of the three pillars of SF4C: the Whole School Food Approach (WSFA), Planetary Health Diets and Cooking, and Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement. Each pillar section offers actionable steps, tips, and links to useful resources and reports developed in SF4C. Good practices from African cities are also presented. Chapter six concludes the document.

SF4C Triple Approach - colours



3. Introduction to school feeding programmes in Africa

Food insecurity and malnutrition negatively affect educational attainment, family life, and overall health of schoolchildren. There is extensive evidence indicating that **food insecurity and malnutrition remain a major global public health concern in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)** particularly in the Sub-Saharan African region (de Dieu et al., 2023). Around the world, **school feeding programmes (SFPs)** are recognised to play a crucial role in supporting children's health, education, and nutrition, while also strengthening local economies. However, they **are designed, implemented, and managed differently across countries and contexts**. SFPs take various forms: some are nationally owned, others are administered by international organisations, led by caregivers, or run through partnerships between governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities. In Africa, these programmes operate under varied contexts and constraints, reflecting the continent's programmatic diversity. While school meals are typically mandated by national governments in most cases, with the Ministry of Education overseeing their implementation, there is variation in some countries. For example, in Ghana, the school meals programme falls under the Ministry of Social Protection, while in Botswana, it falls under the responsibility of local governments (African Union Commission [AUC] and New Partnership for Africa's Development [NEPAD], 2022).

Despite the diversity in design, governance, and implementation, a strong commitment to SFPs is evident across Africa. According to the African Union, **89% of African countries have established national school meal policies** (AU, 2022). **This rate increased to 91% in 2024** (Global Child Nutrition Foundation [GCNF], 2024), **demonstrating a widespread recognition of the importance of SFPs**. This commitment is further reflected in the **growing adoption of home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programmes**. The AUC and NEPAD (2022) report highlights this trend, noting that **over 40 AU Member States are implementing HGSF initiatives**. However, the level of government commitment varies across countries. For instance, in Nigeria and Zambia, the government provides financial support for the HGSF programme, although the allocation may be relatively limited. In contrast, Uganda receives little to no direct financial support from the government for its school feeding initiatives, with a heavier reliance on development partners and community contributions (especially caregivers and parents). For Tanzania, the government fully supports public boarding schools instead. These disparities highlight the need for sustainable domestic financing mechanisms to ensure the long-term viability and impact of school feeding programmes across the continent.

In parallel with policy growth and partial financial commitment, **the number of children benefiting from SFPs has consistently increased, from approximately 38.4 million in 2013 to 86.86 million in 2024** (AU, 2025). According to the AU (2022) report, of the 39 countries with available data, the countries with the highest number of children receiving school food are Egypt (11.2 million), Nigeria (9.8 million), South Africa (9.6 million) (GCNF, 2024).

Funding for SFPs in Africa has seen substantial growth, reflecting the increasing prioritisation of these initiatives. Total budgets have increased from $1.32 billion in 2020 to $1.96 billion in 2024, with approximately 83% coming from domestic funding. This demonstrates a significant investment by African governments in children's nutrition and education. Notwithstanding, the $1.96 billion represents only roughly 3% of the global SFP budget of $67.2 billion in 2024 (AU, 2025; GCNF, 2024). In 2024, domestic sources provided the majority of funding, 83%, highlighting the strong commitment of

African governments. International partners contributed the remaining 17%. Within domestic financing, approximately 10% came from the private sector, NGOs, and similar actors, pointing to a widening base of support (AU, 2025).

While the primary focus of SFPs in Africa has traditionally been on educational interventions, there is an increasing trend toward integrating complementary school-based initiatives, such as school gardens for practical nutrition education and life-skills training. This reflects a more holistic approach to child development, recognising that learning outcomes are deeply intertwined with well-being. **While substantial progress has been made, with increased funding, broader coverage, and growing integration of complementary health interventions, significant challenges remain. These include low overall coverage, the absence of dietary guidelines, inadequate infrastructure, weak policy frameworks, poor inter-sectoral coordination, and limited monitoring and evaluation systems**.

4. Setting the scene

4.1 Why school meals?

Schools are unique environments where all children, also from diverse backgrounds — socio-economic, cultural, religious, and geographical — come together. This diversity, combined with the wide range of stakeholders that interact (directly, indirectly) in school systems, makes schools powerful environments for driving societal improvements in food systems:

- **Contributing to Sustainability and Climate Goals**

  School meals serve as an essential link in the food value chain, connecting food production to consumption. By adopting sustainable practices, school meal programmes can contribute significantly to environmental and climate objectives. For example, sourcing organic produce, consuming less animal products, and reducing food waste in schools can lower carbon footprints while supporting local food systems.

- **Enhancing Health and Nutrition**

  School meals can address health and nutrition objectives by ensuring dietary diversity in school menus. School meals can be an effective tool for addressing chronic malnutrition among children in Africa. Through addressing micronutrient deficiencies and providing nutritious meals, these programmes contribute to children's health development and create space for them to become productive adults. By establishing lifelong healthy dietary preferences, SFPs can reduce the prevalence of stunting, obesity, diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases.

- **Empowering Future Generations**

  Educating children about food origins, healthy diets and how these all related to human and planetary health teaches them to make more informed choices as adults. By promoting sustainable eating habits within schools, children and

adolescents take this knowledge with them and in turn influence their families and communities, creating a ripple effect that helps to strengthen food systems and promotes healthier, more sustainable lifestyles.

- **Addressing Social Safety Net, Inclusion, and Equity**

  During the 2008 Food, Fuel, and Finance crises, many governments across Africa decided to expand their SFPs as a way of creating the most extensive social safety nets on the continent. A child fed at school may represent a saving of 10% of household income - a saving which increases for every child fed. Furthermore, SFPs contribute to greater inclusion and equity by supporting children from vulnerable families (marginalised and food insecure) to have nutritious meals, stay in school, and grow into healthy adults, which is a crucial step in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and hunger.

- **Setting up Ambitious Goals in the City's Food Policy**

  Integrating school feeding strategies into broader food governance frameworks - at local, regional and national levels - has great potential to address the multiple environmental, social and economic challenges related to food systems. Cities can use schools as practical entry points for more systemic changes in their food systems, addressing important issues like urban agriculture (e.g. school gardens), procurement practices, food waste reduction and circularity, nutrition and social equity. Changes in food procurement and menu planning can have a direct impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while supporting local economies by sourcing ingredients locally, produced with less water, energy and pesticides (improving soil health and fostering biodiversity) and prioritising seasonal produce.

- **Fostering a New Market and Job Creation**

  Increased adoption of school meals programmes implies higher demand for food produced. By meeting the schools' demand for food with that supplied by smallholder farmers, these programmes can foster a new market (with predictable and structured demand for farm output), boost farmers' income, and create jobs along the entire food value chain.

4.2 About SchoolFood4Change

>> SchoolFood4Change (SF4C) is a four-year EU-funded project, which began in January 2022 aiming to harness the transformative potential of school meals to drive systemic societal change by offering innovative, locally adaptable solutions for schools, meal providers, public authorities, and policymakers. The project took a holistic, multi-level approach, bringing together experts in sustainable food procurement, nutrition, and education. Its efforts focused on a Triple Approach, relying on three key pillars: a whole school approach to food (Whole School Food Approach – WSFA), Planetary Health Diets and Cooking, and Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement. Through an extensive network spanning 12 countries in Europe, the actions have impacted over 600,000 children in over 3,000 schools.

>> Watch this video to find out more!

4.3 The role of cities and regions in promoting sustainable school food

Local and regional governments have the strategic power to influence public health and social and environmental well being through a range of policy interventions. When it comes to school food and meals, education and public procurement are the main tools for cities to promote and influence the adoption of sustainable and healthy food options.

To effectively support schools, cities shall gather political support, ensure effective coordination across municipal departments, and foster collaboration and partnerships with relevant stakeholders and initiatives. Setting up cross-department groups (or task forces) to engage key people, departments and external actors (e.g. food policy councils, provincial or regional government) are essential to coordinate and streamline actions, and to ensure effective implementation in schools.


Image: Pexels / Musa Ajit

5. The Triple Approach



- Whole School Food Approach
- Planetary Health Diets and Cooking
- Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement

5.1 Whole School Food Approach

5.1.1 What is it?

The **Whole School Food Approach (WSFA)** or taking an **integrated approach to food and nutrition** is a holistic method which aims to develop a healthy and sustainable food culture in and around schools. Taking a WSFA means connecting what is served with what is taught and experienced and the wider environments and communities in which food is produced and consumed. It embeds food into curricula and school culture, fostering participation, awareness, and shared responsibility among pupils, teachers, families, and kitchen teams, thereby shaping both demand and behaviour that influence procurement and menu design.

5.1.2 Who does it benefit?

WSFA's educational mission goes beyond the school setting, aiming to influence everyone involved in school food and meal programmes. Accordingly, **implementing the WSFA requires involving all stakeholders** — such as **meal providers, municipal authorities (responsible for food procurement, schools, education, health, sustainability), farmers, caregivers, and schoolchildren** — in learning and interdisciplinary activities that will help them understand the origins of food, its effects on their bodies, and its impacts on the climate and environment. Ultimately, this aims to foster the development of a new comprehensive vision for sustainable school meals.

5.1.3 How should it be implemented?

To develop a WSFA, a school needs to work on four interconnected strategies: **a school food policy (Pillar A), food supply and consumption (Pillar B), food education (Pillar C)**, and the broader (physical) **school environment (Pillar D)**. Each of the four pillars has a set of actionable criteria. Since each school begins its journey toward achieving a WSFA from a different starting point, the programme is divided into **three levels of implementation: Bronze, Silver, and Gold** – each of them corresponding to a specific set of criteria. As a first step, schools must strive to meet all the criteria for the Bronze level. After reaching Bronze, schools can set new goals and work towards additional criteria to advance to the Silver and Gold levels. A useful tool for evaluating the school's current status, identifying its starting point, and pinpointing areas for improvement is the **>> WSFA School Food Culture Review**.

More details about the pillars and the criteria under each level of implementation can be found in the >> WSFA Practical Guide For Schools.

In the tables below, you will find a comprehensive overview of the key actions which cities and schools need to undertake to implement the WSFA.

What the city should prepare for:

Actions	Tips
Develop an **Action Plan** and assess resources available at the city or municipal level.	• As a first step, **assess available resources** in your city – both in terms of staff and budgets. • Develop an Action Plan and decide **how many schools you want to test/pilot** the WSFA. **Focus on two to three schools at a time.**
Identify and select the school(s) where the WSFA will be piloted.	• Make sure to **contact the schools directly** and start with those where you may already have **closer contacts**. • Make sure you know what you can offer and how you can **contribute to the school's implementation of the WSFA**, e.g., by setting aside financial resources to support activities (such as farm-to-school twinning).
Help schools get started and support them along the whole **implementation process**.	• Assist the School Food Working Group in assessing **what already exists** in schools through the School Food Culture Review (see above) and in **developing an Action Plan**. • Make sure you can regularly be **present in the schools** to provide tailored support (e.g. if schools struggle to find motivated participants, the city can help set up incentives).
Ensure there is **interdepartmental collaboration at city level** in implementing a WSFA.	• Disseminate the WSFA concept to all **relevant city departments/ colleagues** (e.g. by organising a cross-department meeting). • Make sure the implementation of the WSFA is **integrated in all relevant policies and projects**. • Ensure that implementing a WSFA is **not the work of only one person at city level**.

What the school should prepare for:

Actions	Tips
Establish a **School Food Working Group**.	• Bring together **motivated** school leaders, teachers, kitchen teams, to set up a school food policy around health and sustainability. • Make sure to **involve schoolchildren** in the School Food Working Group's activities to foster ownership and accountability and boost educational impact.
Develop an **Action Plan**.	• Once a **shared vision** for the school has been created, develop an Action Plan setting **short-, medium- and long-term goals**. 💡 **Don't be too ambitious. Try to identify no more than two to three goals or actions to pursue each year.**
Outline a strategy for **follow-up**, **development**, and **evaluation**.	• Schedule up to **four meetings per year** e.g. as follows: • **Meeting 1:** creating the Action Plan and identifying first steps. • **Meeting 2-3:** checking on progress and planning next steps. • **Meeting 4:** assessing results (including achievements, obstacles).

Further information can be found in >> WSFA Practical Guide For Schools (paragraph 1.1).

5.1.4 GOOD PRACTICES

This section highlights examples of how the food education pillar of the WSFA (pillar C) was implemented in Mbale City (Uganda) and Kitwe City (Zambia).



Image: Unsplash / Lagos Food Bank Initiative

MBALE CITY (UGANDA)
THE AFRIFOODLINKS SCHOOL GARDENING PROJECT



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Despite the recognition by >> Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports of the critical role school meals play in improving children's health, educational outcomes, and reducing poverty, the responsibility for providing these meals largely falls on caregivers, guardians, and school administrations. Current modalities include cash contributions, in-kind food donations, and home-packed meals. The Parent-led School Feeding Programme (SFP) began in 1997. In the post-conflict period, the Ugandan government partnered with the >> World Food Programme (WFP) to provide food assistance to children. In 2003, Uganda introduced the >> Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP), followed by the development of national school feeding guidelines in 2013, to improve child health, nutrition, and educational performance. However, across the country, these guidelines have not been fully implemented or consistently disseminated.

IMPLEMENTATION

The >> AfriFOODlinks project equipped schoolchildren in Mbale with practical skills in modern urban farming, enabling them to grow their own food and contribute to diversifying their school menus. A total of 64 pupils from Grades 1 to 5 took part in the initiative through the Young Farmers and Nutrition Club, which brought together student representatives from across the participating grades.

Through hands-on and experiential learning, students and teachers developed practical skills in urban agriculture, including vertical and sack gardening, nursery bed establishment and management, seed sowing, crop transplanting, and urban garden landscaping. These activities not only introduced children to sustainable food production but also connected what they learned in the garden with the food served at school.

The training covered proper watering techniques, pest and disease identification and management, soil enrichment practices, and hardening off. There was active engagement from the schoolchildren, including designing their school gardening model and participating in decision-making processes. The school's Agriculture Club at Mbale Secondary School was established by the schoolchildren and school management. It comprises over 80 members, with the main role being active participation in the school gardening exercise and maintaining the school gardens.

- **Establishment of the School Garden at Mbale Secondary School:** This involved preparing the garden space designated by the school management, and demonstrating different farming techniques like vertical gardening, sack gardening, tyre gardening and container gardening in limited spaces. Essential gardening inputs and tools were distributed to all schools, and roles were assigned to teachers, learners, and school management to ensure garden maintenance.

- **Management of the nurseries and transplanting:** routine nursery management activities were carried out by the learners and teachers, including watering, weeding, pest control, and ensuring optimal growing conditions for the seedlings. These efforts aimed at maintaining healthy seedlings for successful transplanting, the learners transplanted the seedlings to garden plots, planting bags, and containers.
  >> Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings at Mbale Secondary School: There was a continuous engagement with caregivers through the >> Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) Meeting organised by the



school. Caregivers were sensitised on the importance of school feeding programmes, the benefits of proper nutrition for learners, and their role in supporting SFPs. The session also encouraged caregivers' involvement in ensuring the sustainability of school gardens and advocated for caregivers to enrol their children in local school food programmes.

- **Food safety training with Mbale Secondary School Agriculture Club:** children, teachers, and school food service providers at Mbale Secondary School were sensitised on best practices of handling food in order to minimise the risk of spoilage, contamination, and the transmission of harmful agents to the consumers.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The school garden is used for research and group projects by schoolchildren. For example, it has hosted several learners from schools within the city, serving as a hub for sharing knowledge on smart agricultural practices. Surplus produce from the garden is sold to the community, generating income to support both the garden's upkeep and the hub's activities. The hub provides a platform for its members to engage in local school food advocacy and action.

MAIN RESULTS

Before the implementation of the programme, there was limited awareness among key stakeholders on the need to address the issue of school feeding. There was also limited technical capacity and knowledge among the teachers and schoolchildren of the school on urban farming technologies and safe food handling practices. Following and during the implementation of the programme, key stakeholders, including teachers and caregivers, improved their attitude towards supporting school food programmes, and gained a better understanding of the main challenges and solutions related to these programmes. Mbale Secondary School, which now has a well-established school garden, is committed to sell some of the harvests to the school administration to support the sustainability of the project. Schoolchildren have also developed life-long skills such as confidence, public speaking, teamwork, and collaboration because of interschool competition.



Image: Pexels / Frostee Lens Ug

KITWE CITY (ZAMBIA)
TEACHING CHILDREN TO LOVE LOCALLY GROWN AND TRADITIONAL FOODS[1]



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Zambia's **School Feeding Programme (SFP)** dates back to the post-independence period. Following economic challenges, the programme was scaled back during the 1980s and was subsequently revived in 2001/2002, including in response to severe food insecurity and drought. In 2011, the programme was rebranded as Home-Grown School Meals (HGSM) under the Ministry of Education, with additional funding and technical support from international partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP). As of 2018, the programme had scaled up to 38 districts, benefiting approximately one million learners. As part of the deepening institutionalisation of HGSM in Zambia, a >> Directorate of School Health and Nutrition (SHN) was established within the Ministry of Education, and the >> National Strategy on Home-Grown School Meals 2020–2024 was launched.

IMPLEMENTATION

The School Feeding Programme (SFP) for vulnerable and orphaned children at Musonda Community School aims to instil a love for traditional Zambian foods made with locally grown, natural ingredients that are affordable and accessible within their communities. This school is in an economically constrained community. >> Partners for Life Advancement and Education Promotion (PLAEP) helps these children gain access to quality education and nutrition, supporting school retention and academic progression. Adequate nutrition plays a crucial role in enabling school progression. The school carries out a wide range of activities to ensure that children are nourished, supported, and able to learn effectively. Traditional, locally produced meals are prepared and served each day, with schoolchildren also involved in gardening and food preparation as part of their learning.

To address the challenges of late school entry and poor foundational skills, remedial lessons are provided in literacy and numeracy. The SFP operates every school day, reaching more than 800 learners. In addition, a breakfast programme supports at least 50 of the most vulnerable children—those who walk long distances, live in extreme poverty, or are affected by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)—helping them begin their day with energy.

Alongside nutrition and academics, the school offers opportunities for personal growth and emotional support. Life skills training is delivered through school camps and gospel outreach, with every child attending at least one long-weekend camp each year. For learners experiencing emotional distress caused by abuse, violence, deprivation, hunger, or loneliness, trauma counselling is available. More than 300 individual counselling sessions are conducted annually, providing children with vital care and guidance.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The programme has led to a significant and lasting impact in the lives of schoolchildren. Emotional healing through counselling and support has translated into improved classroom performance, with learners becoming more focused, resilient, and motivated to succeed. HIV-positive schoolchildren are experiencing better health outcomes,

1 This case was collected by the Partners for Life Advancement and Education Promotion (PLAEP) organisation, which offers school meals with particular support for children living with HIV.



with most achieving viral suppression as a result of consistent nutrition and care. Overall, an increasing number of learners are passing with good grades and progressing to college education.

LESSONS LEARNED

It is important to employ local community members familiar with traditional foods, integrate school-based food production, and establish connections with local farmers to provide nutritious ingredients, which collectively reduce costs, build skills, foster discipline, nurture talent, enhance nutrition, and offer therapeutic benefits.

- Holistic approaches are essential when supporting children from economically disadvantaged communities, as they help address vulnerabilities to multiple negative influences and ensure sustainability.
- Particular attention should be focused on girls due to the nature of their vulnerability.
- Economic empowerment of caregivers must be a key component to sustain gains through the project, as sliding back into poverty is catastrophic.

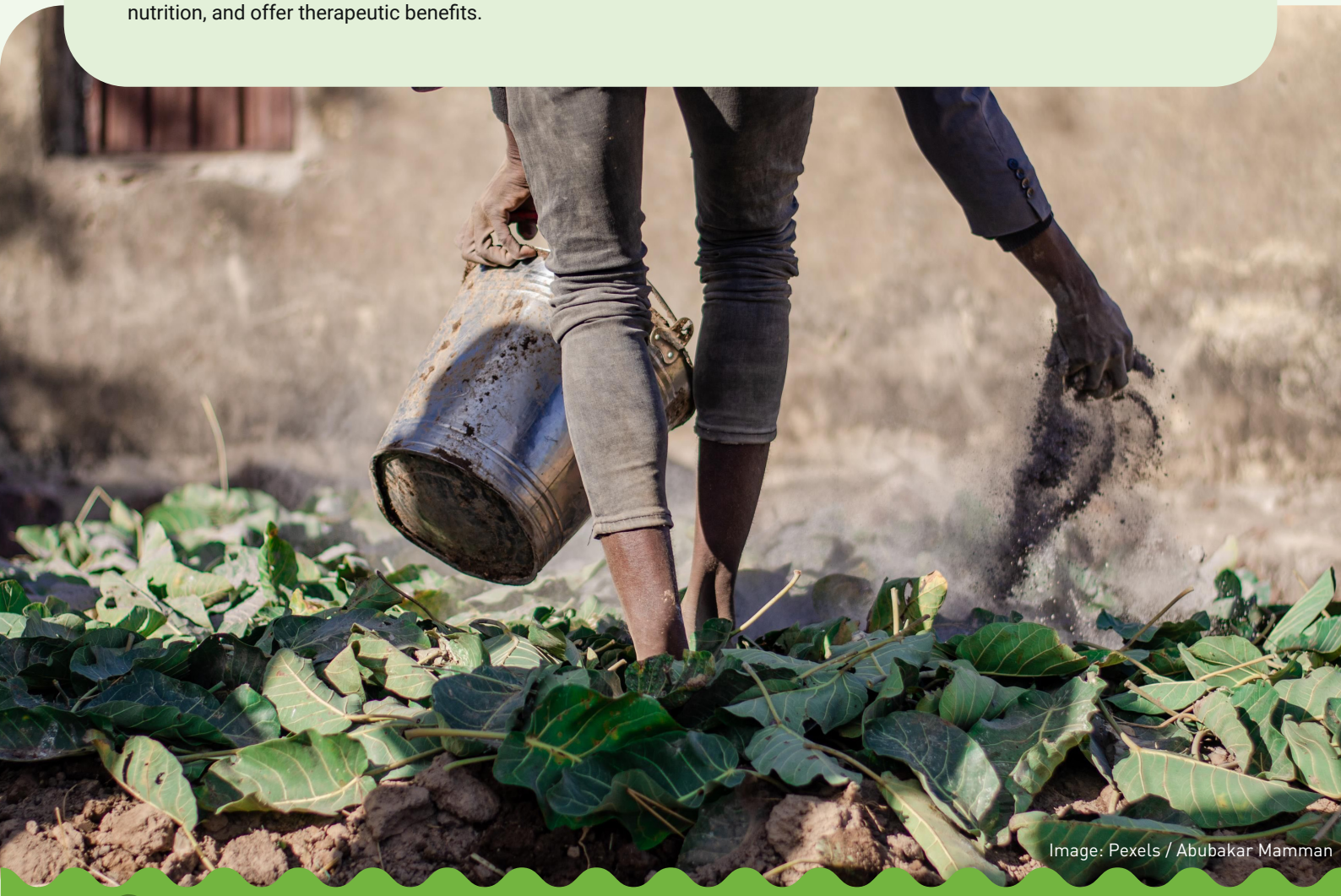


Image: Pexels / Abubakar Mamman

5.2 Planetary Health Diets and Cooking

5.2.1 What is it?

By Planetary Health Diets and Cooking, SF4C refers to an integrated approach to school cooking that promotes healthier, **tastier, more nutritious, and environmentally conscious school menus and dishes**. This approach relies on a range of actions such as the protein transition (an increase in plant based foods), a reduction in salt and sugar, and the promotion of minimally processed foods. In practice, this means introducing more fruit, vegetables, whole grains and legumes and reducing animal products, while ensuring that meals are enjoyable and appealing to children, thereby preventing food waste and increasing nutritional intake. It also highlights the **crucial role of school cooks** in fostering healthy eating habits, supporting their position as key players within the school system. Training of cooks, chefs and kitchen teams plays a key role in this part of the SF4C Triple Approach – to strengthen the capacity and visibility of cooks and kitchen staff (and thereby, the food) to co-create and deliver appealing healthy meals. Training provides a bridge between educational goals and procurement regulations, translating policy ambitions into everyday practice while generating new insights that feed back into both learning and tender design.

5.2.2 Who does it benefit?

School cooks must be at the forefront of transitioning to planetary health diets. They are uniquely positioned to inspire change by preparing meals that align with health and sustainability goals. However, **responsibility extends beyond cooks to include municipal authorities and other urban food actors**. Cities are uniquely placed to form a supportive network together to create the conditions necessary for this transition. Ultimately, schoolchildren, caregivers, and educators also play a key role in embracing and advocating for these changes.

5.2.3 How should it be implemented?

Implementation begins with empowering school cooks as agents of change. In this area of work, SF4C provides professional training programmes — both in-person and online — and provides recipe suggestions to equip cooks with the knowledge and skills to prepare menus using healthy, sustainable, locally sourced and culturally significant ingredients while reducing food waste. Training is built upon three foundational pillars:

- **Food Preferences:** recipes are tailored to enhance children's acceptance of food by considering cultural, religious, individual, and nutritional needs. This fosters inclusivity and respect for diverse dietary practices.
- **Progressive Exposure and Circular Cooking:** strategies and menus gradually shift toward the adoption of diets that benefit both human and planetary health, building on early and gradual introduction of foods to increase familiarity and acceptance over time. Circular cooking principles maximise ingredient use and reduce food waste and its associated environmental impact.
- **Active Learning:** school meals are treated as an opportunity for participatory food education, fostering a sense of community and creating a shared learning environment. This approach integrates nutrition education into the daily lives of children, enhancing food literacy.

For more information about this approach, please check the >> School Menu Design Handbook, and the >> Recipe Handbook, containing 42 recipes specially designed for use in European schools.

In the table below, you will find a comprehensive overview of the key actions that schools and cities need to undertake to support Planetary Healthy Diets and Cooking.

What the city should prepare for:

Actions	Tips
Map existing training programmes for healthy and sustainable school meals in your city, and **identify the schools involved**.	• In your mapping, you can consider training sessions dedicated to kitchen and canteen staff, but also initiatives targeted at teachers, caregivers, and other relevant audiences.
Identify related training gaps and competences that need to be developed, building on the three foundational pillars listed above (Food Preferences, Progressive Exposure and Circular Cooking, Active Learning).	• If some training programmes already exist, you can consider delivering these training as complementary modules/sessions.
Identify pilot schools and target groups to engage.	• The primary target group may vary based on the management and procurement model adopted by the school (e.g. if the school relies on external providers, the main target group would be the catering company). • You can also consider the possibility of inviting other groups to join the workshops, e.g. cooks working in hospitals, senior care homes or other public institutions, and private canteens.
Identify and **engage cook trainers in the training design**.	• To ensure their buy-in and interest, and to build confidence and ownership among cook trainers, it is essential to engage them as early as possible in the design of the training programme. This will allow them to feel heard and valued as a key stakeholder in the school system, and to cater the training to the concrete challenges they face.

Actions	Tips
Define the modules, goals, and delivery format for the training.	• Below is a summary of key aspects to address when designing the training programme: • Modules: agree on the number of sessions, title and content, duration of each session, and timeline (start/end) of the overall training; • Goal: identify the Handbook dimensions addressed in each session; • Delivery format: define the format of each session (in-person, online, hybrid). While the in-person component is key, it is highly recommended to offer a hybrid format whenever possible in order to reach a wider audience.
Assess impact and amplify training outcomes.	• Assessing the initial training's impact can help address any remaining gaps while laying the ground for further dissemination/amplification. For example, results can be shared with the wider public by organising roundtables with schoolchildren, families, teachers and other stakeholders, or by engaging other schools.

What the city should prepare for:

Actions	Tips
Build a network of stakeholders willing to contribute to the project.	• As a first step, focus on getting key stakeholders on board – from the headmaster to the teachers, kitchen / cafeteria staff and caregivers. This can take the form of a workshop/roundtable to gather perspectives on the main needs and challenges as seen by different stakeholders.
Host theoretical and practical sessions of the training.	• When planning for sessions, check the availability of school spaces (e.g. school cafeterias or restaurants, kitchen, classrooms).
Host cooking workshops in the school cafeterias and/ or in the classrooms.	• When planning for the cooking workshop, assess the equipment needed to carry out the workshops and identify possible timeslots (before/after lunch in the canteen, or during class time in the classroom).



CANTEEN DAYS

A great complementary activity to organise alongside the trainings is the "Canteen Day", an **in-person event for schoolchildren, teachers, families, and the wider local community**, designed to promote food education on healthy and sustainable food habits while emphasising the role of families in driving change.

This event should be **organised by the city with the help of schools, cafeteria/ canteen staff, and local food actors** and should take place in a public, easily accessible location such as schoolyards, classrooms, canteens, community halls, parks, markets, or local farms to ensure wide participation.

The activities to host during the event can vary and adapt to the target group(s):

- For children, activities might include workshops on international dishes, offering a fun way to explore global cultures;
- Teachers could be involved in discussions on how to make the canteen a welcoming space for food education;
- Families and the wider public could engage as participants in a "Festival of Taste," celebrating culinary diversity, or attend sessions on how to plan balanced dinner menus, among other activities.

For practical advice on how to organise a >> Canteen Day and to get inspired by concrete examples, please refer to the Canteen Day Guide and the >> Canteen Day Fact Sheet.

Image: Unsplash / Andrew S

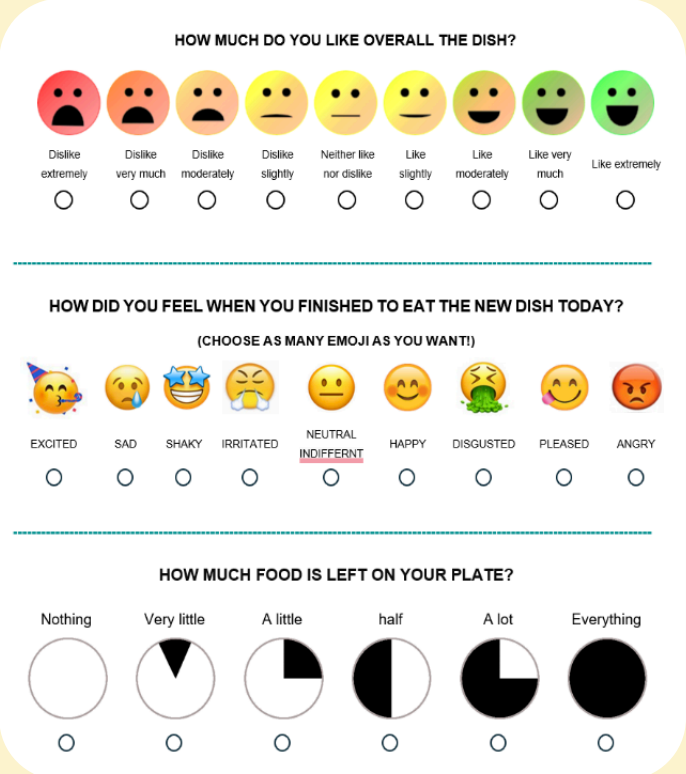
SENSORY TESTS

Children are often reluctant to accept some healthy foods like vegetables due to their natural sensitivity to certain sensory characteristics, such as bitterness or chunkiness, which they tend to reject in favour of sweeter, softer options.

Scientific evidence indicates that **children's food acceptance is heavily influenced by four key sensory factors: appearance, taste, smell, and texture.** To make healthy school meal choices more acceptable and appealing to children, schools could use a sensory test, a scientifically robust tool that gathers valuable information to examine how sensory factors influence emotional reactions to food. **Using a sensory test could be useful for schools to better understand children's preferences and refine their meal offerings, ensuring that healthy and sustainable food choices are more widely accepted.**

To collect feedback, schools can administer a brief, visually engaging questionnaire straight after meals in the school canteen or cafeteria. Simple questions paired with emoticons make it easy for children to share their responses, providing valuable insights to guide menu improvements.

Examples of questions include:



Appearance: How much do you like the colours of the ingredients? How much do you like the smell of the dish?

Taste: How well-balanced do you find the sweet, salty, bitter, and fatty flavours of the dish?

Texture: How much do you like the texture (e.g., crispy, hard, smooth) of the dish? How easy is it to eat this dish?

Overall Liking, Emotions, and Waste: How much do you like the dish overall? How do you feel after finishing the dish? How much food is left on your plate? Sensory feedback is not only useful for adjusting school menus but can also inform educational initiatives for families. Schools can share the results with caregivers, encouraging them to introduce similar healthy, sustainable dishes at home.

For practical advice on how to conduct a Sensory Test, please refer to the section titled "Sensory Evaluation and Acceptance" in Chapter 1, Subchapter 3 of the
>> School Menu Design Handbook

5.2.4 GOOD PRACTICES

This section highlights how Planetary Health Diets and Cooking principles have been translated into practical guidelines in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia).



Image: Pexels

ADDIS ABABA (ETHIOPIA)
SCHOOL FEEDING MENU BOOKLET FOR ADDIS ABABA



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

School feeding in Ethiopia began in 1994 as a pilot project by the >> World Food Programme (WFP) in war-affected zones in the Tigray Region. The aid was later expanded to the remaining five food-insecure regions: Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). In Ethiopia, >> homegrown school feeding programmes rely on locally produced food products. In Addis Ababa, the Homegrown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) was initiated on a small scale by charitable societies, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders. The city administration has since expanded the programme and assumed full ownership. Initially, the programme targeted economically disadvantaged children.

The Ethiopian government has made every effort to ensure that all children have access to education. In February 2019, Addis Ababa initiated a universal Homegrown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) to address hunger and improve the educational outcomes of schoolchildren. The programme provides two meals per day to all public pre-primary and primary schools (grades 1–8) in the city. The Addis Ababa school feeding directive mandates that each child should receive at least 205 grams of food per day, providing approximately 803 calories (SFI, 2025).

IMPLEMENTATION

The >> School Feeding Menu Booklet for Addis Ababa (2025) was developed by the >> Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI), under the mandate of the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with key stakeholders. It is based on the national >> Food-Based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs), which were published in 2022. The booklet provides clear guidance to schools, nutritionists, educators, cafeteria staff, healthcare providers, and policymakers on implementing healthy, inclusive, cost-effective, and culturally appropriate school menus. These menus aim to improve the nutritional status of children in pre-primary and primary schools while also contributing to planetary health.

- Ensuring diverse, balanced, plant-forward diets that emphasize whole grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables, and reducing reliance on resource intensive animal products.

- Preparing balanced menus using energy-efficient cooking methods, minimising food waste, ensuring safe vegetable preparation, and using iodised salt appropriately.

The development of these guidelines for school menus reflects Ethiopia's commitment to addressing food insecurity among children. Rooted in Ethiopia's rich agricultural heritage, they promote locally sourced and home-grown ingredients, ensuring nutritional adequacy while supporting food security and promoting economic and environmental sustainability.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The School Feeding Menu Booklet is currently housed in the Mayor's Office and is intended for implementation across public schools in Addis Ababa. However, it has broader applicability, as other cities can adapt the guidelines based on the availability of local food substitutes and city-specific contexts.

LESSONS LEARNED

Facilitating collaboration among different stakeholders is essential for developing school menus that are responsive to the local context and reflect the diverse needs and preferences of children. At the same time, organising targeted training sessions is important for translating the menu guidelines into practice. Training not only strengthens the capacity of those responsible for implementing the guidelines but also promotes a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, thereby supporting more consistent and effective implementation at school level.

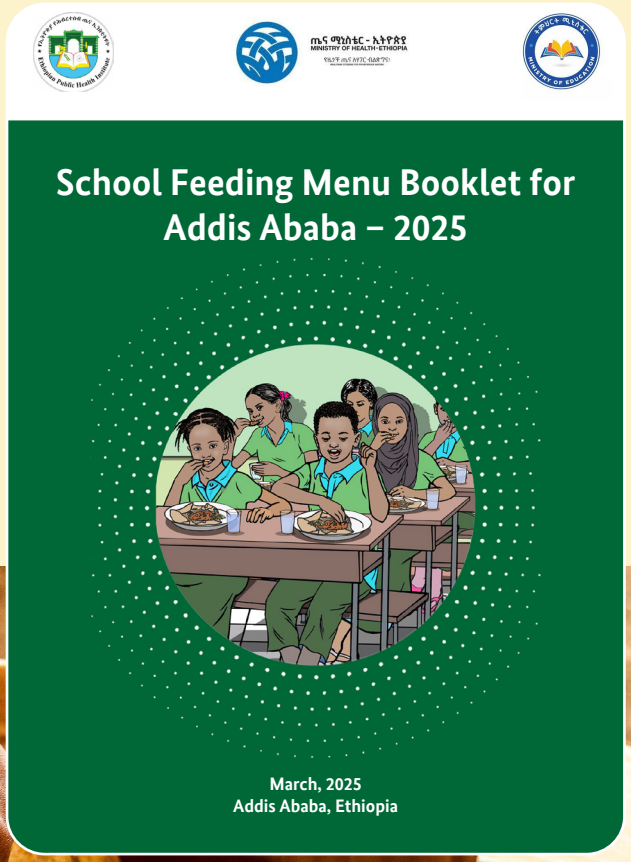


Image: Pexels / Lagosfoodbank

5.3 Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement

5.3.1 What is it?

SF4C's third pillar focuses on **procuring healthy and sustainable food (or catering services) for school meals.** Public food procurement holds great potential in driving transformative change, not only in schools but also in the broader food system. Beyond improving meal quality, investing in sustainable and healthy school food allows to simultaneously support food and nutrition security, to promote social equity, planetary health, biodiversity conservation (healthier soils), and to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

5.3.2 Who does it benefit?

The sustainable and healthy public food procurement guidelines developed in SF4C are designed for local and regional authorities and schools involved in the procurement process, who have the capacity to determine the products or services they want to purchase. While cost is an important factor in selecting providers, it is central for public authorities to also account for health impacts and sustainability criteria when preparing tenders and awarding contracts. SF4C aims to redirect the focus from purely financial considerations to those that also prioritise the sustainability and health of food in schools, ultimately benefiting both future generations and the planet.

5.3.3 How should it be implemented?

The implementation of sustainable food procurement across the continent varies significantly, largely due to disparities in financial and institutional support. Consequently, procurement approaches range from structured, formal systems to more informal, community-driven models. For sustainable food procurement, the following aspects should be integrated into your strategy (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Sustainable Food Procurement Strategy. Source: >> One Planet Network

TIPS TO CONSIDER

TARGET 1: Integrate your commitment to sustainable food into organisational strategies and actively work to build support among staff

Priority Actions	*Criteria*
Regardless of whether a formal or informal food procurement model is employed, the strategy should explicitly promote sustainable food procurement practices.	• Promote healthy diets and a positive food culture. • Consider environmental sustainability (e.g., reduction of food waste, low-carbon sourcing). • Encourage the localisation of food purchases to support local economies and reduce environmental impact.

TARGET 2: Organic Production and Biodiversity Protection

Priority Actions	*Criteria*
At least 30% (by mass/volume, value, or both) of the food and drink products provided should come from certified organic sources (based on the AU biodiversity target).	• Include certified organic products in food procurement and production. • Prioritise sustainably sourced and/or healthier marine and aquaculture products. • Implement energy- and water-saving practices in food production and preparation.

TARGET 3: Nutrition, Quality, Taste, Freshness, and Seasonality

Priority Actions	*Criteria*
All food provided should be 100% traceable to its origin and assessed for quality and taste before service. Wherever possible, fresh and seasonal products should be prioritized, with careful consideration of cost, sustainability, nutritional value, and food waste reduction.	• Frequent use of vegetables, fruits, legumes, and fish in menu preparation. • Prioritise seasonal and fresh products. • Diversify food products in menu preparation. • Prioritise healthier fats in menu preparation. • Prioritise whole-grain products in menu preparation.

TARGET 4: Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions Reduction

Priority Actions	Criteria
Ensure that appropriate equipment is in place to measure greenhouse gas emissions associated with the production, transportation, consumption, and disposal of food, with the goal of achieving progressive reductions over time.	• Prioritise food products sourced through direct or short supply chains to minimise transport-related emissions. • Prioritise locally produced and seasonal foods. • Promote bulk purchasing to reduce packaging waste and transport frequency. • Promote low-emission or electric vehicles for food transportation, where available. • Avoid synthetic fertilizers in food production in favor of organic or regenerative practices. • Implement additional environmentally responsible practices (e.g., composting, renewable energy use, food waste minimisation).

TARGET 5: Reduction of Food Poverty and Inequality

Priority Actions	Criteria
Ensure that all school children are given access to healthy food and that surplus food is redistributed to disadvantaged communities in socially acceptable ways.	• Establish food surplus redistribution measures. • Identify sufficient financial support. • Policies are in place to prevent discrimination or stigma related to receiving food aid.

TARGET 6: Food Education, Food Culture, Culinary Traditions

Priority Actions	Criteria
Ensure that food education is firmly part of school meals, and ensure the active participation of schoolchildren, teachers, and the wider school community.	• Promote and protect local food culture and culinary traditions in school meal planning. • Incorporates food education activities and learning experiences in the school curriculum (e.g., healthy eating, climate-smart agriculture activities). • Collaborate with local farmers and suppliers to reinforce cultural and food system linkages. • Involve caregivers and the wider community in food education initiatives.

TARGET 7: Support for small farmers and Suppliers

Priority Actions	Criteria
Ensure that at least 50% of the food procured originates from small-scale farmers or local suppliers, thereby supporting local economies, reducing the environmental footprint, and fostering inclusive food systems. /!/ the percentage may vary from city to city depending on the dominance of smallholder farmers/suppliers and their adherence to sustainable agricultural practices.	• Prioritise locally produced products by sourcing from small-scale farmers or local suppliers wherever possible. • Minimise procurement barriers by simplifying processes while maintaining food quality and safety standards. • Capacitate small farmers through training, technical support, and access to resources to help them meet procurement requirements.

TARGET 8: Fair Wages and Decent Labour Conditions

Priority Actions	Criteria
Ensure that all staff involved in food procurement, preparation, and service receive fair wages and work under safe and supportive conditions. Actively promote the inclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the food system workforce.	• Gender equality and social inclusion measures are in place (e.g., equal pay, non-discrimination policies). • Policies supporting work-life balance (e.g., reasonable working hours, caregiver leave). • Opportunities for skills development, training, and career progression. • Mechanisms for worker voice and representation (e.g., union participation, grievance procedures).

OPERATIONAL AND PROCUREMENT MODELS

When considering integrating more sustainability and health criteria into school food procurement processes and tenders, one of the first steps is to closely consider the **operational structure of school food provision** - that is, food preparation and provision models - and the procurement model or approach in place. These can vary widely between municipalities, across regions or countries, and even among individual schools within the same area.

In terms of **food preparation models**, schools can operate through on-site kitchens, where meals are cooked and served immediately or centralised kitchens, where meals are prepared by the municipality, regional government, or catering provider and then distributed to schools. In other cases, catering companies are responsible for preparing meals at their premises.

Provision models can also differ, ranging from in-house catering, where meals are both prepared and served on-site, and there is direct procurement of food as ingredients for cooking the meal rather than catering services, to contract catering, either through public or private companies. Some cases involve a combination of the two approaches.

Another difference can arise from the **procurement model** in place. The procurement can be centralised (organised by the municipality) or decentralised (handled by the schools themselves) or a mixed approach.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY FOOD PROCUREMENT FOR CITIES

The table below provides a comprehensive overview of the key actions that cities can undertake to implement sustainable food procurement. Depending on the specific set up of each municipality or school, and the political context at diverse governmental levels (that is, local, regional, national level), and the market readiness and availability (that is, supply, particularly local or regional) different pathways and degrees of ambition in terms of sustainable food procurement can be pursued.

In the case of public procurement, there are no tailored recommendations for schools as the scope of action may vary significantly depending on the country's regulations, on the operational model in place and on the size of the school (resources).

What the city should prepare for:

Actions	Tips
Explore the most relevant opportunities based on the procurement and provisional model you have in place.	Not all the proposed actions may work in your context, as they will depend on the procurement model in your city. To get started, the following questions can help provide an understanding of where you stand: • How many tenders are you planning? • Who is in charge of planning the tenders? • What type of procurement do you conduct (direct food purchasing or catering services)? What institution is the tender intended for? • What is the contract duration?
Assess your political and legal framework and identify potential enabling factors.	Fundamental factors to foster sustainable food procurement are: • Wide accessibility to knowledge infrastructure that facilitate best practice exchanges (e.g. P2P learning and capacity building activities); • Political commitment towards sustainable food systems such as a local (city) food strategy (e.g. Ghent, Copenhagen).
Understand the market needs and challenges.	• Market dialogues in the pre-tender phase are useful to identify potential suppliers and relevant products or services available on the market. On the other hand, they also provide an opportunity for suppliers – particularly small scale producers - to present their products and prepare for the upcoming tender process. For example, smallscale farmers can learn how to apply for a tender. • If you want to host a market dialogue, the ideal timeline is three to six months prior to tendering. For further information, please refer to the **>> Short guidance for market engagement and stakeholder dialogue**.
Update the criteria and objectives into your food and catering tenders.	• Refer to the guidelines presented in paragraph 5.3.3

SCHOOL GAME: ROLE PLAY FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN ON PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT

As part of SF4C, a role-play type of game was developed with the aim of **raising children's awareness of the stakeholders and dynamics behind school food procurement**. The game brings together multiple aspects of SF4C and builds on the observation that food and nutrition education is essential to help children make more informed choices about their diets and understand the health and sustainability impact of those choices.

The game's rules are summarised as follows:

1. Split schoolchildren into groups, each representing a different stakeholder group among small farmers, teachers, schoolchildren, caregivers, caterers, health public department (doctors), municipal purchasing office.

2. Provide each group with a card stating who they represent, what is their main interest and goal to pursue.

3. Let the groups negotiate and discuss among themselves to find deals.

4. Every agreement is worth one point. The group that gets the highest score wins.

Example of a card:



SMALL FARMERS

Who are you?

You are a family of farmers, you have a farm. You and companies like yours produce fruit, vegetables and cereals. You produce quality food and respect local traditions. You take care of the land and diversify production, protecting the landscape and biodiversity.

What do you want?

You want your children at school to be able to eat the food you produce locally, respecting the seasons and traditions. But it is difficult to sell your products to the school because you cannot guarantee the quantities required and the price required is too low.

5.3.4 GOOD PRACTICE

This section highlights how procurement principles similar to those underpinning Innovative, Sustainable and Healthy Public Food Procurement have been adopted in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia).



Image: Unsplash / Barnabas Sani

ADDIS ABABA (ETHIOPIA)
THE ADDIS ABABA SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME

IMPLEMENTATION

The Addis Ababa school meals programme aims to provide nutritious meals to schoolchildren while supporting local supply chains. It operates through an outsourced model, with caterers' associations coordinated by the >> Bureau of Women and Children Affairs and contracted for five-year periods to manage daily operations. Each year, the programme requires approximately 11,975 tonnes of teff[2], about 11% of the city's market, primarily sourced from nearby districts bordering the city, especially those in the southeast and along the northwest corridor, which are well-positioned for supply due to their proximity and transport links. The program also requires 12,384 tonnes of wheat flour annually for breakfast bread rolls.

Each association, serving roughly 50–70 children, has considerable autonomy in selecting suppliers for most ingredients. However, industrially processed products such as bread, wheat flour, and cooking oil are procured centrally through city-negotiated contracts with major companies. The menu, established annually by a city taskforce, plays a significant role in shaping the procurement market. Caterers typically source teff and vegetables from wholesalers or local retailers, while rice is obtained from neighbourhood shops. This approach balances decentralised decision-making with centralised procurement, enabling both cost efficiency and logistical support.

KEY INSIGHTS

Since March 2025, a public call has been launched to allow the registration of family farmers and entrepreneurs interested in joining the school feeding supplier network, with a focus on healthy, sustainable and locally produced products.

1 Teff is a tiny grain, smaller than a poppy seed, belonging to the millet family and predominantly grown in Ethiopia.



Image: Pexels / Abenezer Muluken

6. Conclusion

This guidance document demonstrates that sustainable school food systems are not only possible in African cities but essential for achieving intersectoral goals in education, health, environment, and socio-economic development. As highlighted through case studies from Uganda, Zambia, and Ethiopia, integrated approaches, such as the Whole School Food Approach, Planetary Health Diets and Cooking, and Sustainable Public Food Procurement, provide effective pathways to improve child nutrition, while strengthening local economies, promoting environmental sustainability, and empowering communities.

Despite progress, several challenges persist, including low programme coverage, inconsistent policy frameworks, funding disparities, and infrastructural limitations. Nevertheless, with increasing political will, strong regional momentum, and locally adapted innovations, African cities are well-positioned to scale up transformative school food programmes. This will require a shift from siloed interventions to systemic change that places children and sustainability at the centre of urban food systems development.



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This Replication Guidance has been produced in 2025 as part of the Horizon 2020 funded project SchoolFood4Change (grant agreement No. 101036763), within Work Package 6 “Outreach, Replication and International Cooperation” led by ICLEI Europe.

About the project SchoolFood4Change

SchoolFood4Change is an EU-funded project running from January 2022 to June 2026, aiming to make school meals tasty, enjoyable, educational and healthy for both people and the planet. It involves children, young people, parents, school staff, canteen managers, cities, policy makers, researchers and experts to turn schools and canteens into places where nutritious, sustainable food is served. Working with partner cities, the project promotes knowledge sharing, participation and educational activities in schools to strengthen young people’s understanding of healthy eating and empower them to advocate for sustainable food habits in their communities. In this way, the project has already impacted more than one million children. More than 1,400 cooks and kitchen heroes have been trained to help children learn better and grow every day. And more than 3,000 schools are already serving healthier meals across Europe.

>> **Watch this video to find out more!**

About ICLEI and ICLEI’s global CityFood Programme

ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability is a global network working with more than 2500+ local and regional governments committed to sustainable urban development. Active in 125+ countries, we influence sustainability policy and drive local action for low emission, nature-based, equitable, resilient and circular development. Since 2013, ICLEI’s global >> **CityFood Programme** supports local and regional action for sustainable food systems to leverage the transformative power of food to build resilience.

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