



Bridging Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems and School Meals Programmes: Evidence and Gaps

Indigenous Peoples' food systems (IPFS) go far beyond conventional agriculture.³³ They form a mosaic of cultivated fields, young and aged fallows, grazing lands and forests, interwoven with lakes, rivers, and other water bodies. These landscapes sustain a wide variety of plants, insects and animals, including wild edible species, all harvested in harmony with nature's seasons. At their core are Indigenous Peoples' values of care, and respect for nature.

Despite their essential contributions, IPFS are often marginalized in current policies and programmes and are the most affected by socio-economic and climate-related disparities. Paradoxically, they also hold many of the solutions to global crises. Indigenous Peoples possess millennia of accumulated wisdom, remarkable resilience, and adaptive capacity, offering innovative solutions for sustaining diverse food systems and responding to the impacts of climate change.^{1,2,3,4,5}

School meals are the world's largest safety net, nourishing 407.8 million children worldwide.³⁴

These meals are well known for keeping children in school, learning and thriving. Less recognized are their wider social and economic benefits, including supporting local agriculture and strengthening cultural heritage.

Effectively integrating IPFS into school meal programmes is a crucial step toward ensuring

equitable access to adequate, nutritious, and diverse food for all.⁶ Prioritizing this approach can strengthen food sovereignty and foster intergenerational and intercultural knowledge exchange. Public procurement for school meals can also drive demand for foods produced through agroecological and regenerative practices rooted in Indigenous traditions, supporting the livelihoods of Indigenous producers, enhancing biodiversity and strengthening the overall resilience and sustainability of food systems. This brief identifies the barriers to Indigenous Peoples' participation in school feeding supply chains and outlines ways to overcome them.

Barriers to inclusion

Bureaucracy and Restrictive Regulations: Weak and culturally disconnected public procurement guidelines, burdensome bureaucracy, and rigid food safety regulations hinder the participation of Indigenous farmers in public procurement and limit the inclusion of their traditional foods in school meal programmes.^{6,7,8,9,10}

Discrimination and Marginalisation: Indigenous Peoples are rarely consulted in school meal programme design, and widespread discrimination and ignorance about traditional foods contribute to the marginalisation of their knowledge and practices.^{4,6,10,11,12,13,14}

Loss of Traditional Knowledge:

Intergenerational transmission of knowledge is weakening, especially among youth. This is compounded by the lack of integration of IPFS into school curricula.^{10,13,14,15,16}

Organisational and Access Constraints:

Variations in the production of traditional foods (driven by climate variability or by policies that fail to actively promote it) and school demand discourage their cultivation. This is exacerbated by historical barriers such as restricted access to land and water, and by organisational challenges faced by Indigenous farmers and public institutions, including lack of technical support and delayed payments.^{6,10,11,17,18,19}

Culturally Inappropriate School Menus:

Standardized menus, the widespread availability of ultra-processed foods in Indigenous Peoples' communities, and the lack of intercultural education contribute to the weakening of Indigenous students' relationship with traditional foods, undermining their food sovereignty.^{4,11,13,14,18,20}

Limited Research and Specific Evidence: Few studies document school feeding initiatives that benefit Indigenous communities or promote culturally appropriate diets.^{11,12,21}

Positive evidence

Nutritional value: Many Indigenous Peoples' traditional foods are rich in nutrients and minimally processed, promoting both healthier and culturally appropriate diets.^{7,10,22,23,24,25}

Hybrid and collaborative governance: Inclusive governance models combining Indigenous and formal norms, such as shared leadership, are more effective in ensuring the participation of smallholder farmers in public procurement.^{6,9,26}

Knowledge integration: Policies are strengthened by combining traditional and scientific knowledge, with Indigenous Peoples leading the process and intergenerational transmission.^{1,4,18,19}

Strengthening Local Supply Chains and Good Practices: Home-Grown School Feeding programmes, which source safe, diverse, and nutritious food from smallholder producers—can expand market opportunities for Indigenous Peoples. In parallel, promoting agroecological

regenerative and circular practices, grounded in co-creation of knowledge with Indigenous communities, supports the production of traditional foods and its inclusion in school meals.^{4,8,17, 21,27,28,29}

Inclusive Policies and Food Valorisation:

Adapting regulations and institutional practices, such as intercultural nutrition education, combats prejudice and supports the recognition of traditional foods.^{1,3,6,10,16,18}

Conclusion and recommendations

Integrating IPFS into school meals, particularly through Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programmes in Indigenous Peoples' territories, is key to ensuring culturally appropriate diets, supporting Indigenous producers, and strengthening ancestral ties to land and knowledge. This approach promotes healthier, more diverse meals for children and fosters intercultural dialogue and Indigenous self-determination. The following is proposed to advance these goals:

Governments and Public Institutions: Align public procurement policies with the IPFS, strengthen the HGSF and agroecological networks, and guarantee the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the design, governance, and provision of food for school feeding programmes.

Indigenous Peoples: Encourage the preservation and intergenerational transmission of traditional food knowledge, stimulate community leadership and alliances with public institutions, and collaborate with schools to promote intercultural food education.

Research and Educational Institutions: Produce evidence – ideally led by Indigenous researchers – on culturally appropriate school meals, integrate Indigenous Peoples' knowledge into school curricula, and recognize traditional foods as both cultural heritage and a foundation for public health.

Ensuring the meaningful inclusion of IPFS in school feeding programmes requires shared responsibility, sustained investment, and a commitment to equitable partnerships that value Indigenous knowledge and governance.

The two case studies below illustrate, in practice, how school feeding can contribute to the recognition and strengthening of Indigenous Peoples' food systems: the first highlights its role in the education, conservation, and promotion of traditional foods; the second emphasizes the importance of legal frameworks that are adapted to support culturally appropriate menus and ensure access to safe, healthy foods that align with the logistical and cultural realities of Indigenous communities.

Box 1 – Northeast India

Meghalaya, home to the matrilineal Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo Peoples, lies within the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. Despite its biodiversity, child malnutrition remains a concern. In 2022, the Northeast Society for Agroecology Support (NESFAS) launched the "Linking Schools to Agrobiodiversity" project, supported by Indigenous Partnership for Agrobiodiversity and Food Sovereignty (TIP), building on India's national school meals programme, PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman) scheme. The initiative engages Indigenous Peoples' communities and schools in co-developing community-led, nature-based school meals.

Communities prioritized the inclusion of seasonal, local food plants and expanded school gardens with traditional crops, while chefs and nutritionists guided cooks in innovating with neglected and underutilized species³⁰, such as wild edibles. So far, the project has impacted 411 students across 11 schools in seven villages, leading to a 30% increase in children maintaining a healthy weight, supporting 120 farmers through local procurement, and reviving interest and pride in heritage foods. A partnership with the Education Department has led to the dissemination of best practices to 7,000 cooks-cum-helpers across the state.

Box 2 – Brazil

In Brazil, the School Feeding Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar - PNAE*) prioritizes Indigenous Peoples both as suppliers, through family farming (HGSF), and as direct beneficiaries, with differentiated financial allocations to ensure culturally appropriate menus for Indigenous students. In addition to promoting biocultural diversity³¹ and healthy diets, the programme is grounded in a rights-based approach, alongside logistical considerations and efforts to strengthen local economies.

In recent years, the country has made progress in adapting PNAE to the circumstances and rights of Indigenous Peoples. A significant milestone was the official recognition of the unique characteristics of traditional food systems, which led to an exemption from food quality and safety requirements for foods produced by these communities, provided they are intended for consumption in schools located within or near the community.³²



This brief was developed by the Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems Coalition Working Group on School Meals, with key guidance and support from the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. For further reading, please consult the [reference list](#). For additional information, visit the Indigenous Peoples Food Systems Coalition (IPFSC) [website](#) or contact the IPFSC Focal Point, Alejandra Pero (alejandra.pero@wfp.org).

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