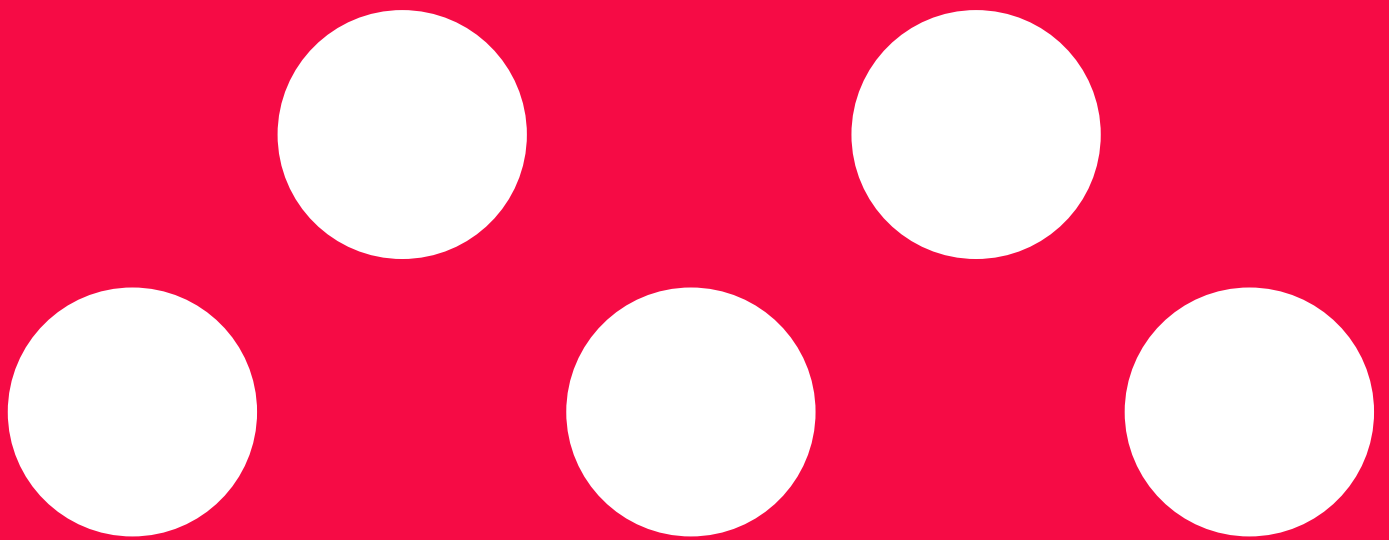


More than a meal

The impact of school feeding programs
on kids, family, and society

The Kellanova logo is displayed in a white semi-circular area at the bottom of the page. It features a stylized red 'K' followed by the word 'ellanova' in a red, sans-serif font.

Research funded by Kellanova Fund
Conducted in partnership with The Global FoodBanking Network

February 2025

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Background

Since 2020, [Kellanova](#) Fund—formerly Kellogg Company Fund—has commissioned several pieces of research to help better understand the role of school feeding programs (SFPs) on child development.

Beyond the well-evidenced [physiological impact of food on learning](#), the research has helped us develop an understanding of these programs' impact on children's behavior, their parents, and the relationships between them. We've also been able to see that SFPs—by being social spaces which can serve as [community building facilitators](#)—provide an atmosphere where children can form [deeper bonds with one another](#), allowing them to become more social and caring. This is backed up by research from Defeyter et al (2016).

In this latest round of research, we wanted to step outside of the school gates to understand the broader impact of SFPs, specifically those tied to food banks, from a societal perspective. To achieve this, we collaborated with The [Global FoodBanking Network](#) to visit SFPs and food banks in South Africa, India, Mexico, Canada and Australia and perform in-depth interviews with operators, volunteers, and families. The Global FoodBanking Network works with partners in over 50 countries to recover and redirect food to those who need it. In 2023, its network provided food to more than 40 million people. Kellanova is a founding member of The Global FoodBanking Network.



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Research Aims

This report builds on previous findings by expanding the scope of research from a primary focus on the impact of SFPs on students' sense of community and individual development to a broader exploration of the intersection between SFPs, food banks, and their collective role in fostering community cohesion and inclusivity.

While the previous research highlighted SFPs as spaces that promote kindness, peer bonding, and academic benefits through stable, inclusive environments, this report delves deeper into their extended societal impact, examining how SFPs and food banks serve as gateways to healthcare, social support networks, and cross-cultural integration.

This report incorporates findings from diverse global contexts, including South Africa, India, Mexico, Canada, and Australia, and emphasizes the critical role of these programs in addressing stigma and fostering intergenerational learning—themes that were nascent in previous analysis. Together, these developments provide a richer understanding of how such programs transcend nutritional support to drive holistic societal benefits.

While previous research explored the effect of SFPs from the perspective of the children who partook in them, this round focuses on the perspectives of parents and operators to determine how SFPs and food banks can help build communities among children.



Methodology

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research approach to understand the perspectives of parents and operators of food banks and SFPs. We conducted the study across five diverse markets to explore potential cultural differences in experiences and insights: Mexico, Canada, South Africa, India, and Australia.

Between November 2024 and February 2025, we conducted a total of 64 in-depth interviews with parents and program operators, either in person or via online video calls, depending on feasibility and participant availability. This approach ensured a flexible and inclusive method of data collection, accommodating participants across different geographical and logistical contexts.

Our questions fell under three broad topic pillars:

Countries	Participant Numbers	
	Operators	Users
Mexico	8	13
Canada	4	6
South Africa	3	12
India	6	9
Australia	3	

- Community Integration:**

To what extent do school feeding programs—facilitated by food banks—contribute to building community cohesion, and how can these effects be enhanced in diverse communities?
- Social inclusivity:**

How do food banks support inclusivity where they support diverse communities and promote social harmony?
- Social Support Networks:**

How do food banks facilitate the development of social support networks, and what role do they play in accessing support for kids and their families beyond the need for nutrition (i.e., socialization and healthcare)?

By employing qualitative interviews, the research aimed to capture firsthand experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to school feeding programs. This methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of how such initiatives operate within different cultural and socio-economic environments, while highlighting the role of parents and program facilitators in ensuring food security and nutritional support for children.

Summary & Highlights

In conducting the research, we found that the benefits of SFPs and food banks primarily fell into three buckets, from the individual child to the larger family unit to the community at large.

SFPs help children integrate into their communities



SFPs offer children a fertile environment for building and fostering friendship bonds. Beyond the obvious nutrition benefits, SFPs provide children with the nourishment and energy they need to engage more fully in extracurricular activities within school and in their communities. These shared meal opportunities also help create a sense of belonging among students and staff that extends beyond the meal itself into the rest of the day. Plus, the inherently inclusive nature of SFPs helps improve relationships between different community groups. Finally, SFPs can offer a gathering point – or “arrowhead” as one parent called them – to bring important physical and mental health services to young people and their families.

SFPs encourage social inclusivity, often directly or indirectly engaging the entire family and passing along skills like food waste reduction



SFPs often benefit the entire family unit. Mornings are less stressful for parents when they know their children will join others at a breakfast feeding program. For families who rely on the meals to meet their children’s nutrition needs, an even greater burden is lessened. As an added benefit, the open-to-all nature of SFPs introduces behaviors around social inclusivity (sharing, accepting, including, etc.) that children then model at school, at home and in their communities. Additionally, in some countries, SFPs nurture the family dynamic, providing sessions on meal preparation, food safety and hygiene tips, food waste reduction, and healthy eating suggestions. At a minimum, students bring home some of these learnings and often share with the family.

SFPs help build bridges in the community



There is evidence that, through the shared experience of their children using SFPs, parents are building formal and informal networks – such as WhatsApp text groups – where they exchange ideas and experiences to support each other within the community. These programs also can act as critical gateways to other resources, including healthcare, extracurricular activities and social support engagement. The volunteer nature of food banks also builds bridges. Volunteers of various socioeconomic backgrounds from across the community working together at a food bank creates empathy and a sense of shared responsibility among participants.

Main Findings

We structured this report into pillars, building outward from the children themselves, through their families into the wider society. We have viewed each of these topic areas through the lens of the impact of SFPs on community and society.

SFPs help children integrate into their communities

We found rich evidence of how SFPs facilitate a deeper integration of children into their communities, from creating space and time for extracurricular activities and helping to further develop social skills, to providing access to healthcare, fostering connections between children, and helping reduce stigma within the community.



Supporting holistic development

Participation in SFPs has been observed to enable children to focus better throughout the day, leading to improved academic performance and freeing up time for extracurricular activities. One respondent noted: **"If one is in the right state of mind, you are able to navigate through life or even try and build yourself"** (South Africa, Respondent 507). In Canada, a parent remarked: **"I think it's super important just so we have something midday [...] to help them with their energy and help them get going in school"** (Canada, Respondent 583). Additionally, these programs allow children to participate more actively in school-based clubs, sports, and arts, which are often linked to better social and academic outcomes.

Improving physical health outcomes

Beyond the obvious benefits of receiving proper nutrition, SFPs also have an indirect impact on children's physical health: by ensuring regular access to nutritious meals, these programs help reduce visits to healthcare providers caused by malnutrition. According to one interviewee: **"We get social support because most of the time the association [is] coming here to the learning center helping us as a parent [as well as] the children"** (South Africa, Respondent 569). Programs in Mexico have also been linked to improved access to healthcare services: **"I believe that the food bank is like an arrowhead [doctors and nurses]. They can conduct hemoglobin tests and inquire about their children. I think we have also referred children who have problems, perhaps needing a psychologist for issues they've encountered or other concerns."** (Mexico, Respondent 85).

Main Findings

Building bonds between children

Shared meals foster a sense of community and camaraderie among children. As noted by a respondent, “[t]hey greet each other when they see each other on the street” (South Africa, Respondent 499). In Canada, a participant observed that **“kids are really encouraged to bring their friends along [to a school breakfast program], or to volunteer in the concession to hand out the lunches and stuff like that. So, they are really encouraged to share with each other.”** (Canada, Respondent 588). These examples illustrate how such programs nurture positive social interactions and relationships among children.

SFPs encourage social inclusivity, often directly or indirectly engaging the entire family

Across the countries we surveyed, we found evidence of how SFPs bring benefits to the family unit as whole—not just the children. Feedback from interviewees shows that not only did consistent access to food help lower levels of stress at home, improving personal relationships, it also provided an opportunity for learning, with children bringing home knowledge on topics such as hygiene and food waste reduction.



Bringing family members together

SFPs and food banks can nurture the family dynamic, **“positively affecting interpersonal relationships between [parents] and their child”** (India, Respondent 430). In Canada, a parent highlighted how the program reduced stress in the mornings, saying it **“took the pressure off of us as parents of just being like, we know that our kids have breakfast at school, and it's taken care of and socially they're okay and nutritionally they're okay.”** (Canada, Respondent 587). Some food banks by design encourage families to participate together in the preparation of meals. In Mexico, for example, **“[we] have run these programs, and there have been cases where we invite families to cook together. For example, if it's just the mother, we might say, 'Let's see, son, you can wash the vegetables.' Or if the son is a bit older, 'Maybe you can cut the vegetables.' And even the husband might join in”** (Mexico, Respondent 57).

Main Findings

Disseminating valuable life skills

Children participating in SFPs often bring home more than just a full stomach—they share important learnings from their time at the program, like hygiene and sustainability. These lessons often end up spreading outside the home into the wider community. In Mexico, for example, one interviewee shared that **“even if not everyone [...] participates, seeing positive changes in others—like a sister, mother, or mother-in-law—can create a ripple effect. For example, when we talk about hygiene, initially, people might arrive with unkempt hair. But as the project progresses, they start arriving with their hair combed and cleaned. This change is observed by others, who then think, 'Oh, this is what I should do.' The positive practices spread within the community”** (Mexico, Respondent 67). Similarly, a respondent in India noted that when their child is with his friends, he **“shares [his] food, and reminds his friends about hand washing and other hygiene tips”** (India, Respondent 355). In other locations, SFPs have become an **“avenue for nutrition education”** (Australia, respondent 593). This is done through **“the types of food we provide. They're healthy, they're wholesome. Whilst we're doing it, we have our Superhero Foods initiative, which is all about teaching kids about healthy eating in a fun and interactive manner.”**

Breaking barriers

By design, foodbanks and SFPs open their doors to anyone that needs support, with members of The Global FoodBanking Network required to maintain non-discrimination policies; per a food bank operator in Mexico, they **“do not distinguish by religion or age [...]. There is a general invitation”** (Mexico, respondent 136). In Australia, operators found that explicitly positioning and stating that SFPs and breakfast programs were open to all, regardless of need, led to an increase in attendance and inclusivity and a reduction in stigma felt by participating children.

“Open a breakfast program. Everybody comes along. Invite them all in and for the first week maybe you will be absolutely inundated, and you'll wonder why you did it. [...] But give it three weeks, you'll still have the same number of them coming through. It's not stigmatizing children as food insecure and distinguishing [them] from children that aren't. And so, there's the connection and improved dynamics with children sharing some toast or sharing some cereal together, [...] and not labelling [some] children as disadvantaged [and that these programs are] something for those children only.”

—Food bank operator, Australia, Respondent 597

A respondent in Canada echoed these sentiments, noting that **“when the breakfast program became available to everyone, it reduced the stigma for families needing support”** (Canada, Respondent 587).

Main Findings

SFPs help build bridges in the community

In our research, we observed that SFPs help create support networks among the parents and families of those who attend them, as well as with the community at large. Whether these are created formally by the schools or programs or informally outside of the program, these additional support structures provide families an opportunity to share experiences and help each other.



Building networks

We found that SFPs often become a focal point for community interaction, helping alleviate stress. One parent in South Africa observed that they **"have great meetings at school because sometimes we don't know each other. We deal with so many different problems when we get home, but when we get to the meeting at school, we get a lot of help"** (South Africa, Respondent 570)

These networks often form organically, as well. We found that, in the absence of organized meetings, parents will take it upon themselves to set up group chats on WhatsApp to share tips and guidance with each other.

Fostering empathy

Volunteerism is a cornerstone of SFPs and food banks. Beyond helping ensure these programs are properly run and resourced, the involvement of volunteers of various socioeconomic backgrounds from across the local community helps build a sense of empathy and responsibility among participants. For example, a program in Canada sees children from private schools volunteering at food banks to help distribute meals and learn about the importance of community service. According to an operator, the students **"were into the leadership, they were into being a part of it, and then a couple [were] just more interested, I guess, [in the volunteering aspect]. And I find that those kids that volunteered a lot then are still volunteering a lot now. They get kind of established, 'I want to be a leader, I want to be involved, I want to participate'"**. (Canada, Respondent 211).

Helping their own

In certain countries, SFPs go as far as providing living quarters for their volunteers, providing a platform for mutual assistance and enhancing community cohesion. For instance, a breakfast program in India makes sure **"our staff gets food, living space, [and] connectivity. [S]ince our employees are spread out, it is a bit difficult to provide other facilities to everyone at once. We make sure to take care of smaller things like mobile recharge, living expenses (food, clothing, etc.), and we make sure to organize parties from time to time for the employees."** (India, Respondent 315).

Conclusion

School feeding programs and food banks provide much more than just meals; they are pivotal in shaping healthier, more cohesive communities. Their impact spans improved opportunities for children, strengthened family dynamics, and enhanced social bonds within the broader community. These programs demonstrate that addressing basic nutritional needs is a powerful lever for driving holistic societal benefits. The examples from South Africa, India, Canada, Mexico, and Australia reveal a universal truth: when basic needs are met, individuals and communities thrive. Continued investment and innovation in such programs is essential to creating a more equitable future for all.

Findings by Country



South Africa:

Promoting inclusivity, fostering community

In South Africa, school feeding programs (SFPs) and food banks have played a transformative role in fostering community cohesion and support networks. Community meetings organized through these programs have become spaces for mutual aid and emotional support. One parent shared: **"We have great meetings at school because sometimes we don't know each other. We deal with so many different problems when we get home. But when we get to the meeting at school, we get a lot of help."** (Canada, Respondent 211)

SFPs also promote inclusivity in the community by facilitating interaction between different segments of society.

Interviewer: Is this program able to facilitate exchange and potentially exclusivity between different social groups e.g. ethnic and religious?

Interviewee: Yes, most definitely. Most definitely. You understand food for what is there for everybody. We don't look at gender, we don't look at age, we don't look at religion. You understand.

Additionally, programs have had a profound impact on public health. Collaborations with clinics ensure that children and families have access to vaccinations and essential health screenings, with some programs bringing healthcare professionals on site. By addressing both nutritional and health needs, these programs create a foundation for long-term community resilience.

Findings by Country



India:

Reducing stigma, developing skills

In India, structured and consistent school feeding programs (SFPs), such as breakfast programs, help reduce stigma associated with asking for help in terms of food and hunger. Specifically, **"children are able to associate food with the curriculum itself and not as a helping hand; this was seen during COVID-19 when Feeding India would set up stalls in villages for food distribution"** (Respondent 313)

Much like in South Africa, SFPs in India help to support children with developing the skills that may be required in adulthood, with sustained access to nutrition meaning they are able to take on more extracurricular activities. According to one respondent, **"they provide encouraging environments that children look forward to. My daughter is often very excited for her extracurricular activities like dance classes, so much so that she is often over engrossed in it. So, I try to curb her time input into extracurricular around when exams take place"** (Respondent 383) According to another, **"there is improved attendance, and social development is also focused on by the schools as they have more bandwidth due to the food being taken care of, in terms of computer classes, dramatics, etc."** (Respondent 320)

Several respondents in India also note that SFPs help foster better relationships between children; they also equip them with important learnings that they bring home with them. One parent shared that their son **"is definitely more mindful about taking only as much as he can consume, and he is very caring towards his friends, so much so that shares the food, and reminds his friends about hand washing and other hygiene tips."** (Respondent 355)

Findings by Country



Canada:

Promoting community, developing social skills

Canada's school feeding programs significantly impact the wider community through inclusivity, normalization of assistance, and volunteerism. A hallmark of these programs is their ability to bridge socioeconomic gaps. One standout initiative involves children from private schools volunteering at food banks, where they help distribute meals and learn about the importance of community service. This not only provides much-needed support for food banks but also fosters empathy and a sense of social responsibility among young people.

The normalization of receiving assistance has had a significant social impact. Programs specifically designed to be universal, rather than targeted at low-income families, reduce stigma and encourage broader participation. A parent noted that **"when they switched this breakfast program to, like, just anyone can grab and go and get it any time, it normalized it for them. And [...] it took the pressure off of us as parents of [knowing] that our kids have breakfast at school and it's taken care of and socially they're okay and nutritionally they're okay"** (Respondent 587).



Mexico:

Reducing stress, sharing learnings

In Mexico, school feeding programs (SFPs) have served as critical community hubs, fostering collaboration and engagement **"without discriminating against anyone"** (Respondent 42). This approach ensures that families from diverse backgrounds can benefit, creating a shared sense of belonging and community support.

Health benefits are also a key feature of these programs. The food helps the children to feel good, stay healthy, and focus better at school. By addressing nutritional needs, these programs enhance the wellbeing of children and reduce strain on families who might otherwise struggle to provide consistent meals.

Findings by Country



Mexico:

Reducing stress, sharing learnings (cont.)

Additionally, these programs promote intergenerational learning, with parents becoming more involved in their children's education and wellbeing, learning from each other. One participant, speaking about mothers' experiences at an SFP, noted that they have seen an improvement in the dynamics of their family: **"They tell us everything, saying: 'Before, I did not talk to my husband; before, this and that happened; before, I just gave food to my son and that was all. Now, we prepare food together, wash dishes together, and do everything together.' I believe that we changed the family dynamic for the better and left a little spark for them to improve and be much better as a family"** (Respondent 95).

By providing consistent access to nutritious meals, these programs also create stability that benefits the wider community. Respondents highlighted how families experience reduced stress and greater opportunities to participate in community life. This stability fosters stronger, more connected neighborhoods.



Australia:

Reducing crime, building skills

In Australia, school feeding programs (SFPs) extend beyond providing meals by incorporating food education. As one operator noted, **"It has really become an avenue for nutrition education."** This program ensures children learn about healthy eating in an engaging way through initiatives such as the Superhero Foods program, which makes nutrition education fun and interactive.

Beyond learning about nutrition, SFPs also support children in acquiring practical food preparation skills. One respondent noted: **"They can pick what they're going to have on a sandwich. Some of them are making their own sandwiches as part of a bit of a skill development activity so that if they do have access to these products at home, they actually know how to prepare sandwiches for themselves."** The goal is to empower children with the ability to prepare their own meals, particularly those facing food insecurity at home.

Findings by Country



Australia:

Reducing crime, building skills (cont.)

In some communities, SFPs have been linked to a reduction in crime rates, particularly in cases where food theft was a recurring issue. A targeted effort to provide food to young children involved in such activities led to a decrease in crime and positive community outcomes. Similarly, these programs have contributed to behavioral improvements in schools. In one case, a child with a history of bullying exhibited compassionate behaviors after being encouraged to volunteer in the program. This demonstrates the potential of SBPs in fostering empathy and social responsibility among students.

Australian SFPs have made significant progress in reducing stigma by removing the tie between them and food security and emphasizing they are open to all students. One operator shared, **"If you try and cherry-pick children to come to the program, chances are you're going to stigmatize them, and they won't rock up"** (Respondent 597). Instead, by welcoming all children, the programs normalize participation, create inclusive environments, and foster positive interactions among students. **"It's not stigmatizing children as food insecure... it's about children sharing some toast or cereal together and not being labeled as disadvantaged"** (Respondent 610). This inclusive approach strengthens peer relationships and builds a sense of normalcy around food assistance.

By providing a common space where children can gather, the programs also foster friendships and improves social skills, as well as serving as a gateway to broader community support. For example, some programs extend assistance beyond food by addressing other issues, such as period poverty, with one program providing a **"program as part of our extension of the breakfast program where schools can order packs for young women experiencing period poverty"** (Respondent 601). SFPs also help connect families to external support networks through partnerships with local organizations, police, and healthcare providers.

The impact of SFPs extends beyond the school environment and into the broader community. Schools have observed instances where children bring their younger siblings or even their parents to breakfast, strengthening family ties, making them **"a great way to build community in the school as well as feeding those that need it the most"** (Respondent 605). Within households, SFPs help alleviate stress for families struggling to put food on the table, with one respondent noting that **"it really lightens that big stressor for families and improves the quality of family dynamics because they are able to share a meal that is more nutritious"** (Respondent 609). By reducing financial and emotional strain, these programs contribute to more stable and supportive home environments.

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