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Sustaining School Feeding for the Long Term

Lessons on Domestic Financing from Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province, Argentina

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Education Division

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INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

SUSTAINING SCHOOL FEEDING FOR THE LONG TERM

Lessons on Domestic Financing from
Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires
Province, **Argentina**

By Milena Dovali
and Marie Tamagnan



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1.

Introduction

School Meals Programs (SMPs) stand out as a key tool for enhancing the overall well-being of school-aged children and promoting education and sustainable development. The region has developed one of the strongest school feeding ecosystems in the world: governments finance an estimated 98% of program costs (GCNF, 2025), and annual public investment ranges between USD 3.6 billion (reported) and USD 7.6 billion (estimated) according to the *State of School Feeding in LAC 2022*. With an average coverage of 51% of all school-aged children, one of the highest levels globally (GCNF, 2025)—LAC demonstrates a long-standing political commitment to ensuring that children receive nutritious meals at school.

Yet behind this regional picture lie important differences in how countries finance, safeguard, and prioritize their school feeding systems. A small set of programs—such as Brazil’s Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE), Mexico’s school feeding initiatives, and the Buenos Aires Province Servicio Alimentario Escolar (SAE)—stand out not only for their scale but for their fiscal and political resilience. These programs have sustained predominantly domestic financing and maintained high budget priority across changing economic conditions and political transitions, a pattern rarely examined in depth in regional literature.

This technical note explores the political, institutional, and fiscal factors that have enabled these programs to secure and sustain prioritized domestic funding over time. Understanding these enabling conditions is essential: as evidence from IDB–WFP regional analyses show, the durability of school feeding depends not only on operational performance but on the broader policy and financing architecture that shields programs from budget cuts and instability. Key factors include

the extent to which programs are anchored in formal or informal rules—such as constitutional provisions, laws, regulations, or long-standing administrative practices—, predictable intergovernmental financing mechanisms, governance arrangements that distribute responsibility and oversight, and the narratives and coalitions that increase the political cost of retrenchment

Drawing on the 2024 Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) data and inputs from national and subnational officials, we trace the trajectories of Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province and synthesize cross-cutting lessons. We argue that durable priority emerges from the interaction of three reinforcing forces—**institutional anchoring, political continuity, and social legitimacy**, which together transform school feeding from a discretionary program into a permanent expectation of the state. Box 1 presents the conceptual framework that guides the analysis.

Methodological note

This paper draws on a mixed-methods approach combining (i) a structured review of policy documents, legal frameworks, and budgetary instruments; (ii) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the design, financing, and implementation of school feeding programs; and (iii) secondary data from international and national sources. To ensure cross-country comparability, key indicators are standardized across cases. The interview component included conversations with national and subnational officials directly responsible for school feeding policy and program management. In Brazil, we interviewed Karine Santos, General Coordinator of the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) at the Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação (FNDE). In Argentina, the interview was conducted with Bruno José Bozzano, Director of the Servicio Alimentario Escolar (SAE) of the Province of Buenos Aires. In Mexico, we interviewed Uritzimar Jazmín San Martín López, General Director of Food and Community Development at the National System for Integral Family Development (SNDIF), the federal institution responsible for coordinating school feeding programs through the Sistema Nacional DIF. The authors are grateful to these officials for their time and for sharing insights that significantly informed the analysis presented in this paper.

Scope and limitations

The analysis emphasizes the role of durability in sustaining school feeding programs over time; however, durability also entails important trade-offs. Highly institutionalized programs may face rigidity, limiting their capacity to adapt or reform in response to changing needs or evidence. Persistent inflationary pressures can erode meal quality and nutritional value even when programs remain fiscally and politically viable. In addition, highly distributed governance and financing arrangements may complicate accountability and oversight across levels of government. Finally, hyper-localized implementation structures may increase exposure to political clientelism in the absence of strong transparency and accountability mechanisms.



Box 1.

Conceptual framework: How school feeding becomes a durable domestic financing priority

Dimension	What it captures	Key mechanisms	Implications for durability
Institutional anchoring	The formal rules, fiscal arrangements, and administrative routines that embed school feeding within the state	Legal or quasi-legal mandates (constitutional provisions, laws, national standards) Predictable fiscal channels (earmarked revenues, formula-based transfers, obligatory expenditures, protected budget lines) Stable administrative infrastructure (implementing agencies, workforce arrangements, monitoring and procurement systems)	Makes program continuity the default outcome by reducing exposure to annual budget negotiations and political discretion
Political continuity	The political conditions that sustain prioritization across administrations and economic cycles	Leadership and bureaucratic continuity enabling multi-year planning. Policy framing school meals as an educational entitlement or core public services. Distributed ownership and intergovernmental co-responsibility that raises the political cost of retrenchment	Preserves budget salience over time and shields the program from shifts in political leadership or policy agendas

Social legitimacy	The societal support and accountability mechanisms that make retrenchment politically costly	Visibility and broad public support among families, educators, and communities Citizen oversight and social accountability (school councils, parent committees, civil society, unions) Evidence of multisectoral returns and alignment with national and international commitments	Increases public scrutiny and reputational costs of funding cuts, reinforcing long-term political commitment
Outcome: durable priority	Sustained domestic financing and high political salience across shocks and transitions	School feeding shifts from discretionary social spending to an entitlement-like public service	Enables continuity, scale, and resilience even during fiscal tightening or political change
Trade-offs and risks	Potential downsides associated with high durability	Institutional rigidity that limits reform Inflation erodes meal quality despite program survival. Accountability challenges in highly decentralized systems Risk of political clientelism in hyper-localized implementation without safeguards	Highlights the need for adaptive governance, transparency, and periodic reform to maintain effect

2.

Regional overview

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) stand out globally for its longstanding commitment to school meal programs (SMPs). Across 31 countries, an estimated 80.3 million children at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels receive meals at school (GCNF, 2025). The region not only has the highest aggregate coverage of school feeding worldwide, reaching 51% of school-aged children, but also performs at a level comparable to high-income countries, where coverage is estimated at 48% (GCNF, 2025). This scale is closely linked to a predominantly universal policy orientation: most national school feeding programs in LAC are universal by design, even if many do not yet reach full coverage in practice (IDB & WFP, 2023). It has also built one of the most durable and domestically financed SMP ecosystems among low- and middle-income regions. This scale reflects a broader regional policy trajectory in which school feeding is viewed as both an educational and social protection investment—an essential mechanism for reducing inequalities, supporting nutrition, and protecting families during periods of economic volatility.

A defining feature of LAC's SMPs is their high level of domestic financing. Approximately 98% of program resources originate from national budgets, demonstrating that school feeding is deeply institutionalized within public expenditure structures. Moreover, 96% of countries maintain dedicated budget lines for school feeding—well above the global average of 69% (GCNF, 2025). While the region does not appear to rely on a common school-feeding-specific spending target expressed as a fixed share of GDP, several countries use financing arrangements that help create predictability and protect funding over time. These include dedicated budget lines, per-student or per-day allocation formulas, intergovernmental transfer mechanisms, and, in some cases, earmarked or education-linked revenues. Guatemala illustrates the use of a legally established per-child, per-day formula, with minimum daily allocations set by law and differentiated by school level (School Meals Coalition, 2022), while Brazil's PNAE benefits from the broader education financing architecture, including the *salário-educação*. These budgetary commitments help insulate programs from

political turnover and economic shocks, as noted in the *State of School Feeding in LAC: 2022*, where school feeding was identified as one of the most resilient components of national social protection systems during and after the pandemic (IDB & WFP, 2023).

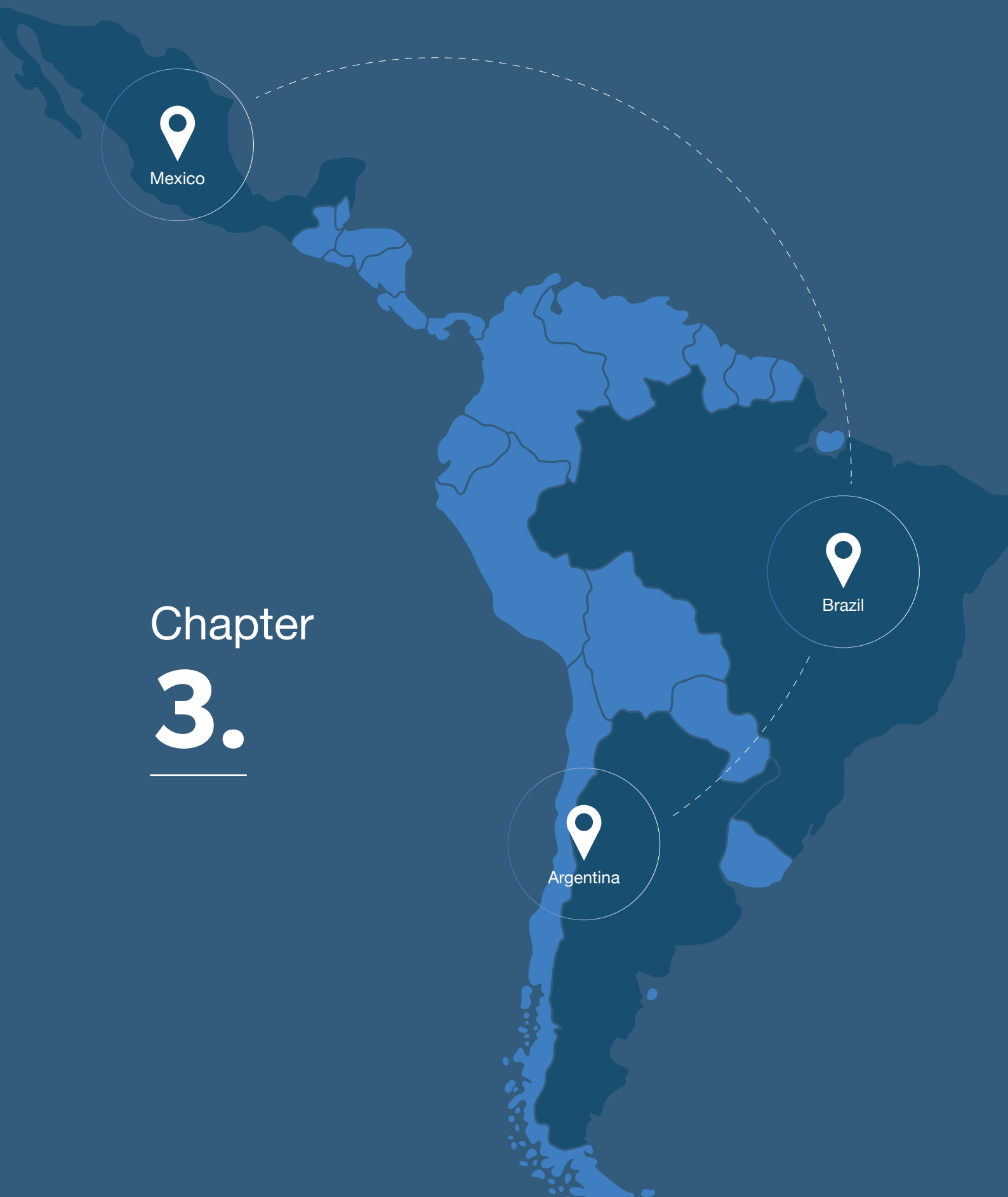
Institutional frameworks reinforce this fiscal stability. School feeding is embedded in national development plans and aligned with food security and education policies, which strengthens policy coherence and long-term planning. Fourteen countries, including Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Panama, Brazil, Belize, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, and Mexico, have enacted laws, national standards, or public policies that formalize school feeding as a state obligation (IDB & WFP, 2023). Such legal mandates help structure annual budgeting processes, enhance transparency, and can make significant budget reductions more difficult to implement.

A further layer of sustainability comes from societal oversight and political consensus. Civil society organizations, networks of nutritionists, and parent committees actively monitor program delivery, hold governments accountable, and mobilize public opinion. This oversight, often combined with cross-party consensus, has helped make SMP budgets politically “untouchable” in many contexts. Similar trends were observed in recent analyses of multisectoral school health and nutrition approaches in the region (FAO and The University of the West Indies, 2021).

The regional commitment is further justified by robust evidence of impact. A 2020 multicounty study in Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Mexico found that for an average annual cost of USD 105 per child, health and nutrition benefits alone ranged from USD 126 to USD 335 per student, while educational benefits averaged USD 2,096 per student. Beyond these gains, SMPs act as an in-kind income transfer worth USD 67 per child and generate an estimated USD 273 per child in local agricultural sales (Bundy, et al., 2020). In Colombia, school feeding has been shown to reduce dropout rates, improve standardized test performance, and increase access to higher education, particularly in technical institutions (Collante Zarate, Rodriguez Orgales, & Sanchez Torres, 2024).

Taken together—**large-scale reach, domestic fiscal commitment, strong legal foundations, active societal oversight, and clear evidence of multisectoral benefits**—these dynamics help explain why LAC has one of the most stable and domestically financed school feeding systems in the world. Yet the interaction of these enabling conditions varies across national and subnational contexts. The experiences of Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province in Argentina offer an opportunity to examine how these conditions are assembled in practice, how they evolve over time, and what lessons they may offer for sustaining prioritized domestic financing elsewhere in the region.

Chapter 3.



Brazil, Mexico and Argentina

The stability and maturity of school feeding in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are the result of decades of reforms, institutional consolidation, and a progressive transition from donor-driven models to nationally anchored social policy. While many countries in the region now finance their school feeding programs entirely through domestic resources, a smaller group offers particularly instructive examples of how legal mandates, governance structures, and political coalitions interact to sustain longterm prioritization.

Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina—specifically Buenos Aires Province—illustrate different pathways through which school feeding has become a durable public service. Brazil's Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) and Mexico's national school meals program are among the oldest and most institutionalized in the region, with histories spanning eight and nearly ten decades, respectively. Buenos Aires Province's Servicio Alimentario Escolar (SAE), while operating at a subnational level, demonstrates how a decentralized government can achieve comparable stability and scale through consistent political commitment, predictable financing, and strong provincial oversight.

Together, these programs reach 42 million students, representing 62% of all school feeding beneficiaries in LAC (GCNF, 2025). Their combined weight underscores the scale that is possible when political will, legal frameworks, and secure financing arrangements converge. More importantly, their trajectories reveal how enabling conditions—such as legal anchoring, intergovernmental coordination, fiscal protection mechanisms, and social legitimacy—take shape in practice and evolve over time.

The following country case studies examine these processes in detail, tracing how each jurisdiction built and sustained its school feeding model, and what lessons their experiences offer for strengthening domestic financing and longterm program resilience across the region.

BRAZIL

3.1.

Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil · Brazil



3.1. Brazil- Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE)

3.1.1. Brazil: Historical Background

Brazil's school feeding program has evolved over eight decades from a partially externally supported initiative into one of the most institutionalized and resilient school feeding systems in the world. Its origins date back to 1945, when the National Food Commission (CNA) was created to address widespread hunger. A decade later, the National School Feeding Campaign (CNAE) expanded coverage with support of UNICEF and, by the 1960s, USAID's Food for Peace program which supplied large volumes of imported commodities and little adaptation to local diets. While these partnerships broadened reach, they also entrenched dependence on external inputs and limited alignment with local food cultures—an issue common across early Latin American school feeding models, as documented in several regional review (IDB & WFP, 2023).

A significant shift occurred in 1976, when CNAE was integrated into the Second National Food and Nutrition Program (II PRONAN) under the newly created National Institute for Food and Nutrition (Instituto Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição—INAN). This integration provided a more coherent institutional framework linking school feeding with national nutrition strategies. In 1979, the initiative was renamed the National School Feeding Program (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar—PNAE), confirming its status as a permanent public policy and one of Brazil's principal nutrition interventions (CGPAE, FNDE, & LabTIME/UFG, n.d.).

The 1988 Federal Constitution further consolidated this foundation by establishing education as a social right and assigned its provision as a shared responsibility of federal, state, and municipal governments. Although school feeding itself was not yet explicitly recognized as a constitutional right, the governance reforms of the 1990s decentralized key aspects of program management to subnational authorities—a transformation noted in several technical analyses as crucial to strengthening responsiveness and local accountability and marking an important step in PNAE's evolution into a universal service for public basic education (International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), 2013).

By the early 2000s, Brazil had achieved full domestic financing, marking the end of reliance on foreign assistance and coinciding with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) strategy. Under this agenda, PNAE was strategically linked to rural development programs, including the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), forging pioneering connections between

school feeding and family farming and laying the groundwork for later legal mandates that strengthened local procurement (CGPAE, FNDE, & LabTIME/UFG, n.d.).

3.1.2. Brazil: Current Implementation

Today, PNAE is one of the largest and most mature school feeding programs in the world, administered by the National Fund for Educational Development (FNDE) under the Ministry of Education. It serves about 39.8 million students (CAISAN, 2024), covering virtually all students in public basic education (INEP, 2024) making it universal entitlement for public basic education.

Financing remains strongly centralized: the federal government allocates resources through a per capita formula based on verified enrollment, transferring funds directly to state, municipal education departments and federal schools. This mechanism ensures predictable, rule-based flows that are protected from annual political negotiation. In 2023, PNAE's budget reached BRL 5.26 billion (USD 1.07 billion), equivalent to USD 26.43 per student per year (Ministério do Desenvolvimento e Assistência Social, 2024).

While financing is centralized, implementation is decentralized: state, municipal governments and federal schools handle procurement, staffing, kitchen facilities, and menu planning within national nutritional standards. A defining feature of PNAE is its legal requirement that at least 45% of federal funds be used to purchase food directly from family farms, a policy widely cited in regional analyses for its role in stimulating local economies, diversifying school menus, and strengthening program legitimacy among rural constituencies.

Oversight is provided by local School Feeding Councils – multisectoral bodies made up of parents, teachers, and community members - which monitor service quality and compliance and provide a channel for citizen participation. These councils are a cornerstone of PNAE's accountability architecture and have been highlighted in regional publications as a best practice for social oversight of school feeding systems (FAO & WFP, 2019).

The program also demonstrates strong operational adaptability. During the COVID-19 school closures, PNAE shifted to delivering food baskets. More recently, it extended emergency financial support to municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul affected by the 2024 floods (Ministério do Desenvolvimento e Assistência Social, 2024).

3.1.3. How Brazil Secured Stable, Prioritized Domestic Financing

The scale and continuity of PNAE are possible because of a set of **institutional anchors** and **political and societal legitimacy** consolidated

over several decades. These elements function as mutually reinforcing safeguards which protect the program from political shifts, fiscal contractions, and competing budget priorities. Together they have permitted PNAE to not only endure but to continually expand its reach, quality and ambition.

Institutional anchors

Institutional anchors refer to the formal mechanisms embedded in Brazil's legal and administrative structure—constitutional provisions, statutory legislation, earmarked revenue sources, and mandatory budget allocations—that ensure the program's long-term stability and predictability.

Constitutional and legal foundation: Brazil's constitutional framework for PNAE rests on two key constitutional amendments. Constitutional Amendment n° 59 (2009) added item VII to Article 208, making it the State's duty to ensure food as part of school education (Câmara dos Deputados, 2010), while Constitutional Amendment n° 64 (2010) amended Article 6 to include food as a fundamental social right alongside education, health, work, and housing (FAO, 2010). Taken together, these amendments secure school feeding as a permanent non-derogable State responsibility and enshrine the right to food in the highest legal framework. Although the Constitution does not set out operational details, it creates a binding legal mandate that cannot be overturned by ordinary legislation.

This mandate is operationalized through Law n° 11.947 (2009) which guarantees free school meals to all students in basic education – from daycare through adult education-- including those in public and accredited philanthropic or community schools. The law defines funding flows and management responsibilities, sets nutritional standards, and a requirement that at least 45% of federal funds be used to purchase food directly from family farming, prioritizing local suppliers. It also mandates School Feeding Councils (CAE) for oversight and integrates nutrition education into the curriculum. By specifying beneficiaries, financial arrangements, quality standards and governance mechanisms, the law translates constitutional principles into enforceable operational rules. (RAES, 2009).

PNAE's durability is therefore better understood as the result of legal and institutional anchoring reinforced by broad social legitimacy, rather than as evidence of full political consensus. Because school feeding is embedded in Brazil's constitutional and legal framework as a State responsibility, it cannot be easily discontinued as a discretionary government program. However, this does not eliminate political contestation: budget adjustments, funding levels, and implementation rules may still be debated across administrations. Consensus appears strongest around the program's existence and

importance, while the resources allocated to sustain or expand it remain more politically negotiable.

Stable revenue source: PNAE's federal financing is underpinned by *salário-educação* — a constitutionally established payroll tax paid by all companies in Brazil and earmarked for public basic education. As a legally protected social contribution established in §5 of Article 212 (1988) it is not subject to annual appropriations and is collected by the federal tax authority. The revenue flows automatically to the National Fund for Education Development (FNDE), ensuring continuity and predictable funding regardless of political changes or fiscal pressures. Of the total collected, 10% remains with FNDE to finance national education programs, while the remaining 90% is divided into a federal quota (one-third of the total, managed by FNDE to support programs such as school feeding) and state/municipal quotas (two-thirds, transferred monthly and automatically to subnational governments in proportion to enrollment) (FNDE, 2024).

Within the federal budget, PNAE is classified as an obligatory expenditure, requiring full execution of allocated resources, unlike in the case of discretionary programs. This combination of earmarked revenue and mandatory budget execution provides strong insulation against fiscal austerity measures. Even in periods of tight budgets, PNAE has maintained near-full execution rates, underscoring how its institutional design shields it from political shifts and funding volatility.

Political and societal legitimacy

Institutional arrangements alone do not fully explain PNAE's durability. The program also benefits from broad-based legitimacy rooted in public support, active civil society engagement, and international recognition. These elements create political incentives for sustained investment and elevate the program's visibility and priority within the national agenda.

Strong civil society oversight:

Brazil's school feeding architecture incorporates extensive mechanisms for social participation and accountability. The National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) influences policy direction and advocates for sustained program funding. At the subnational level more than 80,000 local School Feeding Councils monitor menu quality, procurement compliance, and service delivery at the school level. This multi-level oversight has historically been instrumental in preventing attempts to weaken the program; for example, civil society and social mobilization were instrumental in passing the 2009 law and enforcing the 45% family farming requirement.

International commitments reinforcing domestic priority: Brazil's leadership in global platforms and initiatives -- such as the School Meals Coalition, FAO's Sustainable School Feeding Network, and the Global Alliance Against Hunger -- has raised the political cost of underfunding PNAE. These engagements strengthen domestic commitment by positioning the program as a cornerstone of Brazil's international cooperation agenda and as a reference model for low- and middle-income countries.

Brazil's experience illustrates how constitutional guarantees, dedicated financing mechanisms, and active societal oversight can consolidate school feeding as a stable national policy. The following section analyzes Mexico's trajectory, which reflects a distinct set of political, fiscal, and institutional conditions that have shaped its approach to securing sustainable domestic financing.



Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico · Mexico



MEXICO

3.2.

3.2. Mexico- National School Feeding Program

3.2.1. Mexico: Historical Background

Mexico has one of the oldest school feeding programs in Latin America and the Caribbean – dating back to 1929, when *Gota de Leche* began distributing milk to vulnerable children as a philanthropic health initiative. The federal government soon adopted and expanded the model, and in 1942 *Desayunos Escolares* (School Breakfasts) had been formalized as a permanent public function. Over the following decades, school feeding became increasingly embedded within national child welfare agencies, culminating in 1977 with the establishment of the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (SNDIF). This institutional milestone secured a permanent organizational home and stable source of public funding for the school feeding program (SNDIF, 2024).

In the 1990s, Mexico pursued a broader decentralization agenda that shifted operational responsibilities for social programs to states while maintaining federal financing and oversight. A major reform in 1998 created *Ramo 33*, a mechanism for earmarked federal transfers to state governments. By placing school feeding under the *Fondo de Aportaciones Múltiples* (FAM-AS) in the early 2000s, the program gained a predictable fiscal channel and greater flexibility for state-level adaptation -- allowing the country's 32 states to tailor implementation to their own needs (SNDIF, 2024).

3.2.2. Mexico: Current Implementation

Mexico's School Feeding Program is federally funded through Ramo 33 FAM-AS and delivered by state and municipal authorities. In 2024, the program had a budget of MXN 14.5 billion –with approximately 90% of total financing coming from federal transfers and the remainder complemented by state contributions. The program prioritizes rural, indigenous, and highly marginalized urban areas, reaching 6.6 million children, predominantly in preschool and primary education (SNDIF, personal communication, 2024)¹. Considering that 25.7 million children are enrolled in public basic education, the program covers approximately 25.8% of students (INEGI, 2024).

Federal allocation formulas are designed to channel greater per capita resources to states with higher poverty levels and adequate administrative performance, allowing the program to adapt to diverse local contexts. As

¹ Note. Data provided by the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF) to the project team during technical exchanges in 2024.

a result, per-meal investment varies substantially across states. These differences reflect not only variation in per-student spending models, but also large disparities in the size of the school-age population and in coverage levels. Chiapas illustrates this dynamic clearly: it accounts for roughly **24% of total program beneficiaries nationwide and reaches approximately 94% of its school-age population**, prioritizing broad coverage for a very large cohort of children at an average cost of about USD 5 per meal. In contrast, states such as **Baja California and Nuevo León serve significantly smaller shares of their school-age populations (around 3% and 6%, respectively)**, while allocating higher per-student resources to support more intensive local service models (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia [SNDIF], personal communication, 2024).

The program follows a public health approach with age-specific caloric and nutritional standards—325 kcal for preschool, 425 kcal for primary, and 575 kcal for secondary—and adapts menus to local health needs, such as substituting whole milk with skim in high-overweight prevalence areas. Meals are delivered in two modalities: *cold meals* -- packaged milk, cereal bars, dried fruit-- and hot meals -- freshly prepared dishes (SNDIF, 2024). Although infrastructure constraints shape which modality is used, hot meals have expanded substantially in recent years, now reaching 68% of beneficiaries (SNDIF, personal communication, 2024). Oversight combines federal monitoring, state-level audits, and school-based committees, although reporting inconsistencies limit visibility on spending and service quality.

3.2.3. How Mexico Secured Stable and Prioritized Domestic Financing

Mexico has achieved stable domestic financing for its school feeding program through a combination of political institutionalization, fiscal rulemaking, dense administrative infrastructure, and strong community participation. These elements have enabled the program to remain a protected and widely supported social policy for nearly five decades.

Political protection and institutionalization

From its inception, the program benefited from exceptional political visibility. Historically, the First Lady served as the President of the SNDIF, anchoring school feeding within the Office of the Presidency and positioning it as a symbol of moral and social commitment to children's welfare. This arrangement endowed the school feeding program with direct access to the highest political office, ensuring visibility, protection, and continuity across administrations. The creation of the DIF in the 1970s transformed

this political sponsorship into a permanent public institution, giving the program an organizational home and stable budget within the federal structure. Over time, the program evolved from a philanthropic initiative to a legally and institutionally grounded social entitlement. Although the formal institutional role of the First Lady was discontinued following the 2018 change in federal administration, by that point the program's bureaucratic foundations were sufficiently robust to sustain operations independently.

This institutionalization also helps explain the program's broad political acceptance across administrations. The program predates the current political cycle and has evolved through different party governments: it was institutionalized through DIF structures, reorganized under the EIASA framework during the PAN period, linked to broader food security and social policy agendas under later PRI administrations, and more recently strengthened through efforts to expand hot meals and improve healthy school food environments. This continuity suggests that school feeding has been treated less as a partisan education reform and more as a child welfare, nutrition, and social protection policy with broad public legitimacy.

Fiscal anchoring through Ramo 33 and FAM-AS

A key driver of the programs' fiscal stability is through the *Fondo de Aportaciones Múltiples* (FAM-AS), created under Ramo 33 of the Fiscal Coordination Law. The fund allocates 56% to educational infrastructure and the remaining 44% to social assistance and community development, where school feeding resides. In 2022, the federal government strengthened this arrangement by requiring that 85% of the social-assistance share be allocated specifically to school feeding, effectively converting what had been a flexible window into a functional earmark. This rule ensures that states prioritize school feeding within their budgets and shields the program from sub-national discretionary reallocations or short-term fiscal pressures.

Institutional density and co-financing arrangements

The DIF network provides one of the most extensive administrative social protection footprints in the region, encompassing 32 state systems (SEDIFs) and municipal DIF offices in nearly every municipality. This infrastructure allows the program to operate through about 45,000 school-feeding parent-and-community committees who prepare meals, manage resources and oversee service delivery.

Cofinancing between federal, state, municipal, and community actors reinforces program resilience. States and municipalities typically contribute perishables, staff, or facilities, while federal and state DIFs provide nonperishable foods and equipment. This shared responsibility model

generates a wide coalition of stakeholders with vested interests in sustaining the program and resisting potential budget reductions.

In principle, co-financing could generate inequalities across states, but in practice this risk appears limited because non-federal resources represented only about 10% of total financing in 2024, with most states reporting no non-federal contribution. Meaningful non-federal shares were concentrated in a few states—Sonora (31%), Estado de México (26%), Chiapas (23%), Ciudad de México (21%), Tamaulipas (15%), and Tlaxcala (13%) (SNDIF, 2024). Differences in implementation therefore likely reflect not only fiscal capacity, but also infrastructure, service modality, coverage levels, food costs, and local operational arrangements.

Policy complementarity and cross-sectoral alignment

The program's endurance also reinforced by its ability to align with broader national policy goals rather than compete with them. It complements public health strategies such as the Healthy School Canteen Regulation banning junk food in schools; supports constitutional commitments, such as Article 4 recognizing the right to adequate food; and aligns with federal objectives related to local purchasing and support for smallscale agriculture. These linkages position school feeding as a multisectoral instrument that advances education, health, and rural development simultaneously expanding its political support base and increasing the reputational cost of underfunding.

ARGENTINA

3.3.



3.3. Buenos Aires Province, Argentina: School Feeding Program (SAE)

3.3.1. Buenos Aires: Historical Background

School feeding in Buenos Aires Province has a long institutional history dating back to 1906, when the *Copa de Leche* program was launched at School No. 14 in the City of Buenos Aires. This initiative lay the foundation for future nutrition initiatives and policies aimed at improving student attendance and education outcomes in Argentina.

Before the decentralization of education and social services, Argentina had national programs that supported school feeding, most notably PROSONU, which financed school canteens through transfers from the national government to the provinces (Britos, O'Donnell, Ugalde, & Clacheo, 2003). A major governance shift occurred in 1994 with the Federal Education Law, which transferred responsibility for education—and by extension school feeding—to the provinces. As a result, school feeding became increasingly provincialized, and Buenos Aires assumed direct responsibility for the Servicio Alimentario Escolar (SAE). Initially, SAE provided in-school meals year-round for socially vulnerable preschool and primary school children.

Buenos Aires should therefore be understood as a strong subnational case within Argentina's decentralized school feeding architecture, rather than as the financier or operator of a national program. The focus on Buenos Aires Province is intentional: SAE represents one of Argentina's largest and most institutionalized provincial school feeding programs, illustrating how stable domestic financing can be sustained within a decentralized system.

Significant program adaptations took place in the early 2000s. Framework Agreements in 2000 and 2002 enabled SAE to expand coverage due to growing social demands, supported by a surge in social investment from 2003 onward (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2019). Subsequent reforms further consolidated the program's institutional framework: in 2004, SAE introduced a redesigned breakfast/snack modality that gradually replaced older formats, and in 2008 a new provincial education law restructured school levels, prompting the program's expansion to secondary students.

This reform also decentralized key aspects of program implementation, granting schools greater autonomy over food procurement and menu planning, while reducing uniformity across districts. Over more than a century, SAE has evolved alongside education, fiscal, and social priorities, today functioning as one of Argentina's largest and most established school

feeding systems. (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2019).

3.3.2. Buenos Aires: Current Implementation

The School Food Service Program (SAE) in the Province of Buenos Aires is jointly managed by the Ministry of Community Development and the General Directorate of Culture and Education, with day-to-day implementation carried out by School Councils or municipalities. As of April 2025, the breakfast/snack modality reached 2,305,961 assigned slots, while the lunch/comedor modality reached 950,000 students. These figures refer to service modalities rather than mutually exclusive beneficiaries, since some students may receive more than one meal during the school day. (SAE Directorate, personal communication, 2025).

In 2025, SAE operated with a budget of approximately USD443.1 million - 83% financed by the provincial government -to provide around 415 million breakfasts, 171 million lunches, and 14 million snacks over 180 school days. Program services include tailored meal options for students with specific dietary or health needs. Menu planning adheres to provincial nutritional guidelines that prioritize healthy, minimally processed foods and exclude ultra-processed products. Quality control is supported by school inspectors, educators, and nutrition professionals who oversee compliance with food safety and nutrition standards (Gobierno de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, n.d.).

The program is decentralized across 135 districts. Of these, 109 operate through elected school councils that manage funds and supervise services, while 26 rely on local education or social development departments. This territorial structure allows menus to adapt to local contexts and fosters strong accountability, even as it generates some heterogeneity in quality and administrative capacity.

SAE also places deliberate emphasis on investing in the professionalization of its food workforce. Through the course “*Comprehensive Management and Approach to the SAE*,” school kitchen staff receive training in safe food handling, menu planning, and nutrition education. This capacity-building strategy positions personnel as advocates for healthy eating within the school community, while reinforcing service quality and institutional identity. By integrating kitchen staff more fully into the educational system, the program consolidates a stable workforce and enhances daytoday implementation.

Financing arrangements are also decentralized and adaptive. In the absence of a national law guaranteeing the right to school feeding or earmarked federal transfers, Buenos Aires mobilizes its own resources to cover roughly 83 % of total program costs. National transfers account for

approximately 17% of annual financing, playing a complementary role that supplements provincial resources rather than determining the program's scale. This provincial financing capacity allows Buenos Aires to absorb inflationary pressures and ensure service continuity even during periods of fiscal stress.

Complementing SAE, the MESA Bonaerense program—introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and formalized in 2022—provides food modules to more than two million students to support household nutrition and food security. By sharing logistics, staff, and nutritional guidelines with SAE, MESA has evolved into a structural complement that reinforces provincial food security and programmatic efficiency (Gobierno de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, n.d.).

3.3.3. How Argentina Secured Stable, Prioritized Domestic Financing

The Buenos Aires School Feeding Program (Servicio Alimentario Escolar, SAE) has achieved sustained domestic financing and large-scale coverage through a combination of provincial political continuity, institutional decentralization, professionalized implementation, and programmatic adaptability. In contrast to Brazil's constitutionally guaranteed PNAE or Mexico's federally earmarked FAM-AS, the Buenos Aires case illustrates how a subnational government can maintain policy prioritization and stability through long-term bureaucratic leadership and political alignment, without national legal guarantees or dedicated revenue streams.

Political continuity and provincial commitment

A defining factor behind SAE's consolidation has been institutional and political continuity within Buenos Aires Province. The leadership of the Provincial Directorate has remained in place for over five years -- an unusually long tenure for a provincial administration -- while the Minister of Community Development has served for over four. This continuity has enabled multi-year planning, strategic scaling, and consistent budget prioritization, distinguishing Buenos Aires Province from the frequent administrative turnover typical of decentralized contexts.

Political alignment between national and provincial governments has also facilitated cooperation and predictable transfers, although Buenos Aires has financed roughly 83% of total costs with its own resources. At around 700 billion pesos per month (≈USD 70 million), the program represents one of the province's largest recurrent social expenditures, underscoring its recognition as a core public service rather than a temporary safety net.

Professionalization and human capital investment

Institutional stability is further supported by the formal integration of kitchen staff (auxiliares) into the public education system. Around 20,000 school food service workers are employed by the Ministry of Education, not by private contractors, giving the role greater job stability, union representation, and access to professional development opportunities. This is particularly relevant from a gender perspective, since school feeding programs often rely on unpaid or underpaid care work performed by mothers or women in the community. In this sense, the Buenos Aires model helps recognize school food preparation as formal, skilled, and socially valuable work.

Since 2022, the province has spearheaded a large-scale capacity-building initiative, offering voluntary online courses on food safety, nutrition, and allergy management that confer career “points” for professional advancement. This model can help professionalize school food service workers and strengthen institutional memory, reducing turnover and supporting more consistent program delivery.

At the same time, the public employment model also involves risks that should be taken into account. It may create administrative rigidities, particularly in contexts where evaluating, reassigning, or replacing civil servants can be difficult. The Buenos Aires case should therefore not be read as evidence that public staffing necessarily performs better than outsourcing in all contexts. Rather, it illustrates how a public workforce model can contribute to continuity, professionalization, and gender recognition when paired with effective training, supervision, and accountability mechanisms.

Programmatic modernization and policy relevance

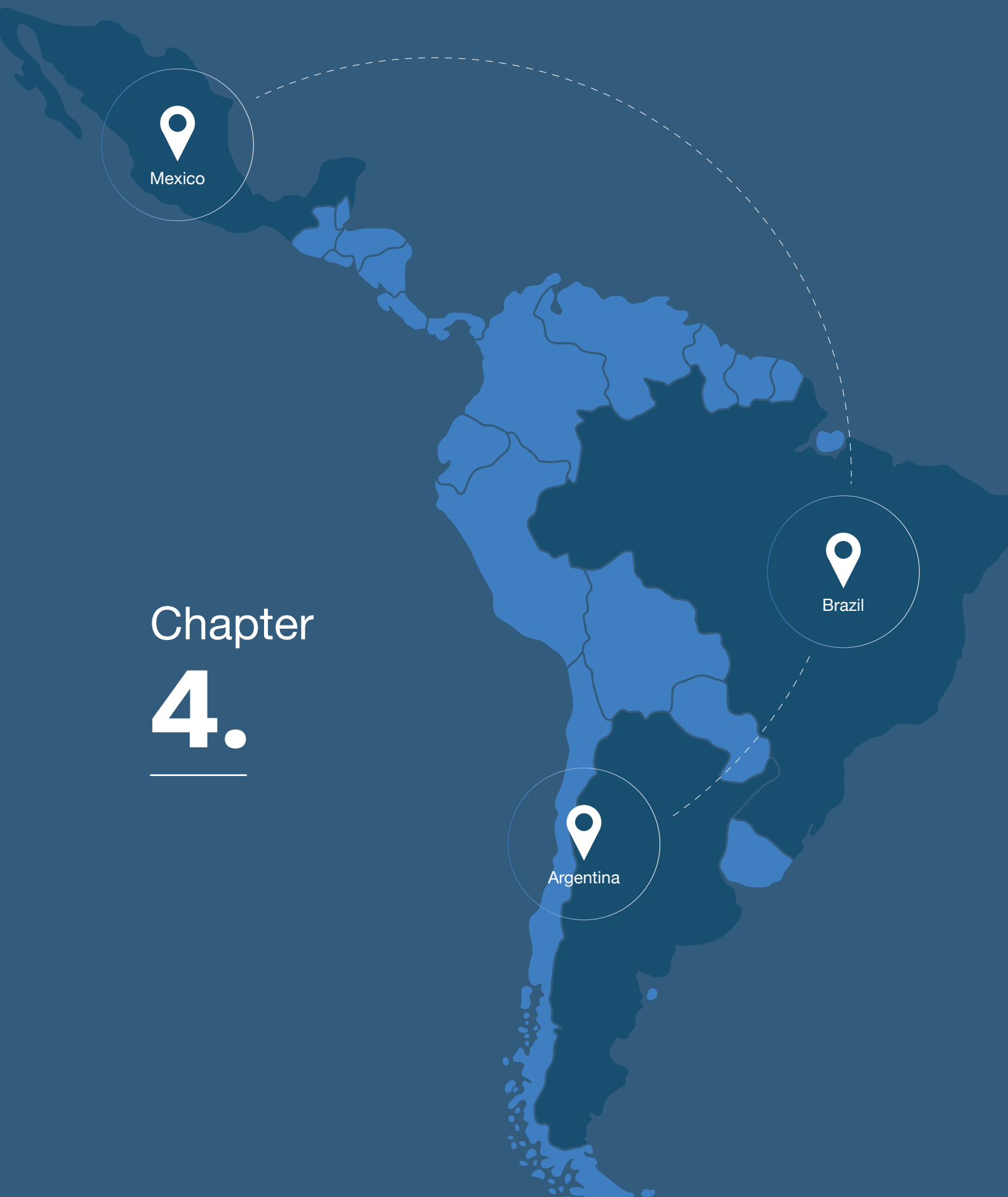
Finally, Buenos Aires has sustained political prioritization of SAE by continually reframing it as an educational and developmental investment rather than a welfare transfer. The ongoing revision of the 2003 operational framework aims to align the provincial food basket with Argentina’s Dietary Guidelines, improve menu quality, and integrate nutrition education into the school environment. In parallel, the province promotes local procurement to strengthen district level economies, positioning the program as a tool for territorial equity and local development rather than solely a social protection intervention.

These policy innovations have elevated the SAE’s visibility and reinforced its educational relevance. The school meal is increasingly recognized as integral to the school day, with officials emphasizing the narrative that “the heart of the school may be the classroom, but the body cannot function without the dining room.” This underscores the idea that school feeding

is not peripheral but central to learning, social inclusion, and child well-being.

Taken together, the experiences of Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province illustrate that there is no single formula for sustaining school feeding as a fiscal and political priority. Each government has assembled its own configuration of legal, fiscal, and institutional instruments, shaped by historical legacies and governance arrangements. Yet across their differences, a clear pattern emerges: all three transformed school feeding from a discretionary welfare-oriented policy into a stable, expected component of public education systems. This transformation did not rely on any single law or funding source, but rather on the interaction between enduring institutions, political continuity, and broad social legitimacy. The following section distills these cross-cutting lessons into a comparative framework to explain how prioritization is maintained even amid fiscal constraints and competing demands.

Chapter 4.



How Prioritization Is Maintained Over Competing Needs/ Lessons for other countries

The durability of school feeding programs in Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province cannot be attributed to budget allocations alone. It arises from the interaction of three reinforcing factors -- institutional anchoring, political continuity, and social legitimacy -- that together shift school feeding from a discretionary social assistance program to a core public service. Although each context achieves this through different arrangements, all converge on the same outcome: school feeding becomes sufficiently embedded, visible, and valued that reversing it carries high political and social costs.

1. Institutional Anchoring: How Rules, Routines, and Resources Create Stability

Institutional anchoring reflects the legal, fiscal, and administrative arrangements that make program continuity almost automatic. In Brazil, the constitutional right to food and Law 11.947/2009 establish school feeding as a state obligation, creating strong legal protection and making funding cuts institutionally and politically costly.

In contrast, Mexico and Buenos Aires achieve continuity through what could be described as *de facto institutionalization*. Even without constitutional mandates, decades of uninterrupted implementation have produced bureaucratic routines and social expectations that function similarly to formal legislation. School feeding persists because it is understood as part of the normal operation of government.

Fiscal mechanisms reinforce this stability. In Brazil, the *salário-educação* payroll tax provides earmarked funds directly to the FNDE, insulating the program from annual budget negotiations. Mexico's *Ramo 33* transfers -- particularly the FAM-AS fund--applies soft earmarks that channel a large share of social assistance resources towards school feeding. In Buenos Aires

Provide, the SAE budget is treated as a fixed cost of the education system rather than a discretionary expenditure, ensuring predictable funding.

Finally, **bureaucratic continuity anchors implementation**. The 20,000 kitchen workers employed by the Buenos Aires Ministry of Education are public employees, creating institutional memory and implementation capacity that endure across political transitions.

Similarly, Mexico's DIF system and Brazil's technical teams within the FNDE function as stable administrative backbones. The lesson across contexts is consistent: durability depends less on legal formality and more on whether rules, routines, and resource flows make program continuation the default outcome.

2. Political Continuity: Why School Feeding Generates Broad Political Support

Political continuity can take different forms. In Buenos Aires Province, the fact that the same administration has remained in office over multiple terms has helped sustain school feeding through stable leadership, multi-year planning, long-term contracting, and fiscal consistency. However, this type of political continuity is not always present. The broader lesson from Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province is that school feeding can remain a priority even across changes in government because it tends to generate broader political acceptance than many other education reforms.

One reason is its narrative flexibility. Education reforms such as curriculum, teacher policy, assessment, or school governance often become ideologically contested because they affect the distribution of authority, professional roles, or institutional interests within the education system. School feeding is different. It is less likely to be perceived as threatening to core institutional interests and can be framed through multiple political narratives at once: child welfare, nutrition, poverty reduction, social protection, support for learning, local economic development, and recognition of care work. This allows governments with different political orientations to support the program while emphasizing different policy priorities.

School feeding also creates a broad and diverse constituency for continuity. Students and families benefit directly, while schools, local governments, parent committees, food service workers, suppliers, farmers, and oversight bodies all participate in or are affected by the program. These actors may support school feeding for different reasons — child well-being, employment, local economic activity, nutrition, or educational inclusion — but together they create a coalition that raises the political cost of retrenchment. Because the benefits are immediate

and visible in schools and communities, cuts are easier to detect and harder to justify once the program has become part of the expected school experience.

This political durability can become even stronger during periods of crisis. In contexts of poverty, inflation, food insecurity, or fiscal stress, school feeding becomes one of the most visible and trusted forms of state support for children and families. This does not mean that the program is free from political debate: budget levels, procurement rules, targeting, service modalities, menus, and labor arrangements may still be contested. However, the core idea that children should receive food at school tends to command broad social and political legitimacy, helping explain why school feeding has endured in Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Province despite differences in political cycles, financing mechanisms, and implementation models.

Institutional interdependence also sustains political commitment. Mexico's 32 state DIF systems and thousands of municipal committees create a shared co-financing and governance structures. This wide distribution of responsibility increases the political cost of retrenchment for any single authority. Buenos Aires achieves a similar effect through 135 local school councils that manage funds and supervise operations. These multi-level structures transform school feeding into a collective responsibility, turning retrenchment into a politically unattractive. In practice, political durability increases when ownership is broad and distributed, not concentrated in a single agency or level of government.

3. Social Legitimacy: How Visibility, Oversight, and Evidence Increase the Cost of Cuts.

Social legitimacy transforms school feeding from a quiet administrative function into a visible social public commitment. In Brazil, the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) and more than 80,000 School Feeding Councils represent institutionalized citizen oversight, creating public accountability for service quality and continuity. In Mexico, parent committees and DIF boards perform similar function, while in Buenos Aires, school councils and teacher unions ensure that community voices remain central. This visibility elevates school feeding to a politically sensitive arena where reductions are likely to produce public concern and pushbacks.

However, social oversight should not be interpreted as a complete safeguard against corruption or clientelism. Because school feeding often involves decentralized procurement, local suppliers, and repeated purchasing decisions, programs may face risks of favoritism, overpricing, or

pressure to purchase from politically connected actors. Councils and parent committees can help reduce these risks by increasing visibility, creating channels for complaints, and making irregularities easier to detect. Their effectiveness, however, depends on whether they have access to timely information, clear mandates, independence from local political pressures, and links to formal audit or sanction mechanisms. In this sense, citizen oversight is most effective when combined with transparent procurement rules, public reporting, regular audits, and higher-level supervision.

International engagements reinforce legitimacy. Participation in global initiatives—such as FAO’s Sustainable School Feeding Network and the School Meals Coalition—allows countries to benchmark progress and signal commitment. This creates reputational incentives that help protect the program during fiscal tightening.

Finally, evidence strengthens the policy case for sustaining investment. Brazil and Mexico have long produced data linking school feeding to improvements in attendance, cognition, and nutrition, framing the program as an efficient public spending. Buenos Aires is moving in this same direction through digital monitoring systems designed to track performance and optimize resource use. When school feeding is seen as both socially legitimate and cost-effective, **continued funding becomes the easiest and most rational choice for policymakers.**

Synthesis: The Ecosystem of Durability

Brazil, Mexico, and the Province of Buenos Aires demonstrate different pathways to a common outcome: the consolidation of school feeding as a permanent public service. Brazil relies on strong legal frameworks and earmarked revenues; Mexico on institutional density and intergovernmental cofinancing; Buenos Aires on bureaucratic professionalization and policy framing. Across all three, durability emerges when:

- **Institutional anchoring** ensures predictable rules and resources,
- **Political continuity** aligns actors and distributes ownership, and
- **Social legitimacy** generates accountability and public support.

Together, these factors create an ecosystem in which school feeding becomes not merely a priority, but an enduring expectation of the state.

Chapter 5.



Conclusion: What Low and Middle Income Countries Can Realistically Do Next Year

The experiences of Brazil, Mexico, and Buenos Aires Provinces show that the durability of school feeding programs is shaped less by economic capacity alone than by institutional design, political commitment, and social legitimacy. These cases illustrate different pathways to sustained prioritization: Brazil through constitutional guarantees and earmarked revenues; Mexico through dense intergovernmental coordination and soft earmarking; and Buenos Aires through provincial budget prioritization, bureaucratic continuity, and workforce professionalization. Across all three, school feeding becomes durable when it is embedded in the everyday functioning of the state—as part of education systems, social protection architectures, and broader expectations of public responsibility for children’s well-being. Box 2 summarizes the main differences across the three cases in terms of program history, coverage, financing arrangements, governance, and budget scale.

The central lesson is that durability can be built gradually. Formal legal mandates can help, but they are not the only path to resilience. Administrative routines, predictable financing, trained staff, community oversight, and evidence generation can also make continuation easier than retrenchment. Once school feeding becomes visible, valued, and operationally necessary, maintaining it shifts from a discretionary political choice to a governance norm. **For low- and middle-income countries, this means that progress does not need to begin with large legislative reforms. Governments can take practical steps in the short term:**

First, countries can establish stronger operational routines. This includes standardized menus, regular procurement cycles, simple monitoring tools, and alignment with the school calendar, so that meal provision becomes part of the normal functioning of schools rather than an improvised or discretionary service.

Second, governments can strengthen accountability and governance. Parent or community committees, monthly school reporting on meals delivered and attendance, and basic administrative monitoring within education ministries can make service delivery more visible. These mechanisms do not eliminate risks of clientelism or misuse of funds on their own, but they create channels for detecting problems and are more effective when combined with clear procurement rules, public reporting, and complaint mechanisms.

Third, countries can improve financial stability. Even modest but predictable funding—such as soft earmarks within education budgets, regular municipal transfers, or protected budget lines—can reduce service interruptions and help programs withstand fiscal stress.

Fourth, governments should invest in workforce capacity. Training for cooks, school administrators, and program staff can improve food safety, menu quality, and consistency across schools, while reducing dependence on informal or unpaid labor.

Finally, countries should strengthen evidence generation. Many school feeding programs track meals delivered, beneficiaries, and budgets, but fewer systematically measure effects on attendance, retention, learning trajectories, or student achievement. A realistic first step is to link school feeding administrative records with education data and identify a small number of priority evaluation questions. Over time, this evidence can improve program design, demonstrate value for money, and sustain public and political support during periods of fiscal constraint.

Ultimately, the resilience of school feeding depends not only on allocating resources, but on deliberately building the institutional and political ecosystem that makes feeding children at school a permanent and expected function of government.

**Box 2.****Scale and coverage of school feeding programs.**

Category	Indicator	Brazil (PNAE)	Mexico (National School Feeding Program)	Argentina (Buenos Aires – SAE)
Program history	Year's program initiated	1945 (formalized as PNAE in 1979)	1929 (institutionalized under SNDIF in 1977)	1906 (modern SAE consolidated in the 1990s–2000s)
	Latest major reform / milestone	2009–2010: Constitutional recognition of the right to food; Law 11.947	National expansion through DIF system and decentralization	2004–2008: Program redesign and expansion to secondary; 2022 formalization of MESA
Coverage	Children receiving meals	39.8 million	6.6 million	2.3 million
	Students in public basic education	39.8 million	25.7 million	2.7 million
	Coverage	≈100%	≈26%	≈85%
Financing and governance	Primary financing source	Federal government via salário-educação payroll tax	Federal transfers via Ramo 33 (FAM-AS) with state co-financing	Provincial budget (≈83%) with national transfers
	Budget treatment	Mandatory federal expenditure with protected execution	Soft earmark within intergovernmental transfers	Fixed recurrent cost within provincial education spending
Budget	Total school feeding budget	BRL 5.26 billion (≈ US\$ 1.05 billion)	MXN 14.5 billion (≈ US\$ 807 million)	ARS 443.1 billion (≈ US\$ 443 million)
	Total education budget	BRL 75.5 billion (≈ US\$ 15.1 billion)	MXN 1.02 trillion (≈ US\$ 56 billion)	ARS 1.3 trillion (≈ US\$ 1.3 billion)
	Share of education spending	≈7.2%	≈1.4%	≈34%*

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