



# Policy Brief

# EU CHILD GUARANTEE AND SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME

A pathway towards inclusion through school meals



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# Introduction

The European Child Guarantee (ECG) initiative aims to ensure that every child in the EU has access to essential services, particularly those vulnerable to poverty or social exclusion. The ECG focuses on healthcare, education, early childhood care, housing, and nutrition. In this document, the key phases are identified, including mentions of the feasibility studies and pilot programs, also in collaboration with UNICEF. Providing free, nutritious school meals is highlighted as a key strategy to combat child poverty and improve social inclusion.

Various EU Member States' approaches to school meal programs are discussed, emphasizing tailored, context-specific solutions. National action plans of the countries to which the Food Trails project cities belong (Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal) are also brought as examples where cities active on food policies can work with. Collaborative efforts are needed to optimise the effectiveness and inclusiveness of policies to ensure children's access to nutritious meals, and many organisations recognised it with the San Sebastian Declaration in 2023, under the Spanish Presidency.



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# The EU Child Guarantee

The **European Child Guarantee** (ECG) represents a pivotal initiative **aimed at ensuring that every child within the European Union has access to fundamental rights** and services, particularly those vulnerable to poverty or social exclusion. **Central to this guarantee is the provision of essential services such as healthcare, education, early childhood education and care, housing, and nutrition.**

In 2019, the European Commission on 24 March 2021, endorsed a proposal for a Council Recommendation delineating the framework for the European Child Guarantee and subsequently, on 14 June 2021, the Council formally endorsed the aforementioned ECG Recommendation.

To operationalize the ECG Recommendation, Member States have designated their respective Child Guarantee Coordinators and are formulating National Action Plans spanning the period until 2030. Member States surpassing the EU average child poverty rate are enjoined to allot no less than 5% of their European Social Fund (ESF+) allocations to address child poverty. Conversely, other Member States are obligated to earmark a proportionate share of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty.

The European Commission devised a structured Preparatory Action comprising three distinct phases aimed at examining the feasibility, financial viability, and implementation strategies of such a program within the European Union.



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# Preparatory Action

## PHASE 1

Entailed an **evaluation of the feasibility, efficacy, and overarching advantages of an EU Child Guarantee Scheme**, with a focus on offering concrete recommendations for enhancing policies and initiatives at both EU and (sub-)national levels

## PHASE 2

Led to the elaboration of another **Feasibility Study for a Child Guarantee**, a detailed study **that explores what could be some of the costs and benefits** for the competent authorities to guarantee in practice that all children at risk of poverty in the EU have access to the five social rights under scrutiny.

The primary initiative under the domain of nutrition is the **prioritization of providing complimentary full meals within school settings**. Furthermore, the FSCG2 elaborates a **first vertical analysis of National Action Plans (NAPs)** adopted by EU Member States with regard to nutritional aspects and underscores the significance of contextual factors and tailored approaches in addressing the nutritional needs of children facing socio-economic challenges.

This analytical framework facilitates the **identification of best practices, areas for improvement, and potential avenues for collaborative efforts among Member States** to optimize the effectiveness and inclusivity of measures aimed at ensuring children's access to nutritious meals within school environments.

An interesting overview of school meals provision in EU Member States is given:

GROUP 1 - Universal free meals (at least at some ages)	EE, FI, LT, LV, SE
GROUP 2 - Targeted free school meals across the whole Member State	CY, CZ, DE, ES, HU, LU, MT, PT, SI, SK
GROUP 3 - Subsidies meals and/or free meals not covering the whole Member State	AT, BE, BG, EL, FR, HR, IE, IT, PL, RO
GROUP 4 - No provision	DK, NL

## PHASE 3

Has seen collaboration between the European Commission and UNICEF to **pilot the practical implementation of the European Child Guarantee and offer recommendations for its effective design and execution**. At this stage, **seven EU Member States** ([Bulgaria](#), [Croatia](#), [Germany](#), [Greece](#), [Italy](#), [Lithuania](#), and [Spain](#)) **have been engaged** to conduct in-depth policy analyses for each of these countries, contributing to the formulation of national action plans for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.



# National Action Plans

The primary objective of the national action plans is to articulate extant and projected national and subnational policy interventions aimed at enhancing the accessibility of essential services, including healthy nutrition, outlined within the ambit of the European Child Guarantee for children in need.



## Denmark

The Danish welfare system encompasses a broad array of measures, allowances, and benefits aimed at supporting the overarching objective of the Child Guarantee. However, in Denmark, **there is no nationwide framework in place to ensure that each child receives a nutritious meal daily at school.** Instead, **voluntary food schemes**, including after-school meal programs, **are coordinated by municipal councils**, leading to potential local variations regarding the provision and nature of food offered in schools and during afternoon day-care.

The draft law amending the Act of Public Compulsory Education includes a **proposal to introduce a legal basis for municipalities to opt to grant a differentiated allowance for meal schemes based on household income.** The Danish State thus indirectly **ensures that all children have access to at least one healthy and nutritious meal each school day.**

In primary and lower secondary schools, the curriculum includes a component titled 'Meals and Health' as part of the mandatory home economics subject to equip students with the skills necessary to make informed dietary choices conducive to their health.

Moreover, **the Social Policy Statement**, the **annual social policy report** which sets out an annual account of the latest knowledge on social policy actions in Denmark **will be the base for the The biennial Danish report under the Child Guarantee**



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Within the “Thematic actions to implement the European guarantee for children by 2030” section, a particular attention is given to children’s nutrition. To combat food deprivation among children by providing them with at least one complete and balanced meal a day, and thus contribute to their success at school and social inclusion, while easing the burden of food expenses for their families, several measures have been put in place, such as:

- **Free breakfast at school** through state aid of €1.3 in metropolitan France and €2 in overseas territories supporting the distribution by local authorities of breakfasts.
- **The 1€ canteens** to enable children from disadvantaged families to have access to the canteen for a maximum of €1/day. In January 2021, the amount of the State subsidy was raised from €2 to €3 for each meal, and the potential number of eligible communes was multiplied by three. More than 53,500 pupils benefited the measure and 4,489,780 meals have thus been distributed at the social rate since it has begun.

The fight against food insecurity also aims to **ensure quality products with guaranteed traceability in school catering**. Several recent legislative measures are designed to meet these objectives:

- 50% sustainable and quality products, including 20% organic products by January 1, 2022 (EGALIM law);
- 60% sustainable and quality products for meat and fish by January 1, 2024 (climate and resilience law);

In addition, work is currently underway to revise the 2011 decree governing the nutritional quality of meals served in school canteens.

It is noteworthy that, **in 2021, France submitted a National Commitment on School Meals, within the School Meals Coalition**. Accordingly, these commitments include an “internal” component relating to school feeding policies and an “external” component relating to initiatives by which France intends to support the development of school feeding programs in other countries, through advocacy, experience-sharing, technical assistance, contributions to research and financial support.



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## Greece

Regarding the provision of healthy nutrition for children in need, a significant challenge arises from the **absence of an integrated national nutrition policy**. The existing institutional framework consists of **fragmented programs with limited scope and geographic coverage**, both within and outside of schools. These initiatives include selective school meal programs, school schemes targeting specific urban areas, social grocery stores operating in certain municipalities, and food aid and basic material support schemes. However, these fragmented efforts **limit the effectiveness and geographical reach of addressing nutritional needs across the country**.

Efforts to enhance child nutrition and dietary patterns within school settings include the **provision of school meals to primary school pupils** in preselected schools, with an annual budget sourced from the state budget. Additionally, the **distribution of fruits, vegetables, and milk in specific urban area** receives funding sourced from both EU and state expenditures.



## Italy

To date, **school lunch services** fall into the category of **individual demand services, the organization of which is provided independently by municipalities based on local needs, policies and approaches** according to specific regulations. The service, where it exists, is provided by municipalities bringing out a **fragmented and varied picture**.

The **purpose is to establish a specific Essential Level of Performance (ELE)** on the provision of one healthy meal a day at school. **The final objective is the application of free for all girls and boys by 2030.**

Other intermediate operational objective are:

- **progressive extension of school lunch service and full-time in preschools and primary schools**, starting in areas where educational poverty is concentrated;
- **reducing contributions by families** to the costs of running the canteen service by extending the free-of-charge bands;
- **offering canteen service in secondary school**;
- **activate a technical coordination table** between all relevant public bodies for consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure a shared strategy.



It is also worth mentioning that **Italy participated in the Phase III of the Preparatory Action** to the Child Guarantee, What has emerged is the following:

- **School canteens are the main legislative priority at the national level**, with regions and municipalities empowered to define procedures and access criteria. They are a **crucial instrument to tackle poverty and food insecurity among underage people**.
- **Regions and municipalities have the power to define the procedures, mechanisms and requirements for access to school canteens, including their costs**. The Department of Health has issued non-binding national guidelines to ensure high-quality basic nutrition for all students.
- **School canteens currently serve 34.2% of girls and boys attending full-time primary school; only 40% of primary schools have regular school canteens**, while in all other cases children eat school lunch directly in their classrooms.

## Netherlands



**Local authorities** play a key role in combating child poverty. On the one hand, they **can support social participation for children** in the municipality. On the other, they have all kinds of channels through which they **can identify families that are living in poverty** and **provide services in kind that support social participation**.

Within the “Nutrition” section of the NAP, there is the “**Healthy School Strategy**”: **the government promotes healthy eating and lifestyle among all children within a four pillars framework**:

- **education**: lessons should incorporate health topics, healthy school activities;
- **policy**: set rules for healthy birthday treats, snacks and lunch;
- **context**: e.g. healthy school canteen, parental involvement, a ‘green’ schoolyard;
- **identify**: identify any health problems that arise

The program prioritizes schools with at-risk pupil populations.

The Netherlands also takes part in the **EU school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme**. Under this scheme free fruit and vegetables are distributed to 3,000 primary schools in the Netherlands for 20 weeks a year



## Poland

The multiannual governmental program titled "**Meal at School and at Home**" spanning from 2019 to 2023 **aims to furnish schoolchildren and adolescents with a hot meal prepared within the school canteen**. This initiative targets students commencing their education at primary and secondary schools and extends support to those hailing from disadvantaged families.

The program offers **various forms of assistance to municipalities**, including **financial aid** to facilitate the provision of meals, **cash benefits** in the form of specific allowances for meal purchases, or **in-kind benefits** comprising food products.

Additionally, **measures have been instituted to cater to refugees from Ukraine**, encompassing both cash and non-cash benefits derived from social assistance schemes, including short-term assistance lasting 1-2 months. Such benefits may **include periodic allowances or specific allowances earmarked for food or meals**, integrated within the framework of the "Meal at School and at Home" Program



## Portugal

In 2021, the **National Strategy to Combat Poverty 2021-2030 was ratified**, adopting a **multidimensional and integrated intervention strategy to address poverty** and, with regard specifically to children and young people, it was also approved the **National Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2021-2024**.

It is within this framework that the preparation of the PAGPI - Plano de Ação da Garantia para a Infância begins. The proposals outlined in the Recommendation are currently being integrated into a comprehensive array of measures being formulated at the national level.

In recent years, **initiatives have been introduced to facilitate access to meals for students with economic disadvantages during school breaks** (i.e. school milk program and the school fruit program) aiming to enhance the nutritional quality of food available to all students.

Notably, the *Strategic Objective 6 - Ensure access to highly educational response and school based activities* is implemented also by this measure: **Provision of at least one healthy meal at school every school day, free of charge, for students with disadvantaged backgrounds**.



# School Meals Programme in Food Trails' cities

Food Trails cities have been working specifically on food policy implementation with a systemic approach and provide an interesting range of solutions regarding school meals programmes and their interactions with healthy choices and food access.

## Bergamo

In Bergamo, school meals are provided by an external private catering company. Within Food Trails, the city developed a comprehensive programme called 'La Buona Mensa', focusing on promoting sustainable consumption and food awareness in primary schools. This initiative involved over 50 classes, with 1,000+ students and 30 teachers starting from 2022. Key actions include: introducing new recipes based on plant-based ingredients to replace animal-based meals, while training the staff, increasing food supplies from short supply chains and organic systems, food education activities raising awareness towards more sustainable consumption.

## Birmingham

Among its initiatives to combat food insecurity, Birmingham runs holiday food programmes, allowing students access to healthy meals even during school breaks. This is part of broader efforts to ensure that no child goes hungry outside of school periods.

Building on these activities, as part of Food Trails, Birmingham launched a pilot to encourage behavioural changes in children's eating habits, by promoting the consumption of beans and pulses. Through engaging activities and educational booklets, the city involved over 7,000 children starting from 2022.

## Bordeaux Metropole

Within Food Trails, Bordeaux Metropole supports school canteens in the metropolitan municipalities through a voluntary program for its municipalities, aimed at sustainable food procurement. The Metropole facilitates joint purchasing of local, organic produce, connecting canteens with producers. Additionally, the Metropole organizes supplier-purchaser meetings, offers local farmers training on public procurement tenders, and holds workshops on sustainable meals for catering staff, promoting eco-friendly, local food in schools.

## Copenhagen

In Copenhagen, municipal kitchens prepare over 115,000 meals daily, serving child care centers, schools, care homes, and homes for the socially vulnerable. In 2019, the city introduced a food strategy aiming to reduce the carbon footprint of municipal meals by 25% by 2025. The school meals programme in Copenhagen is hybrid, with procurement managed by the municipality following national nutritional guidelines and sourcing 90% organic, while schools have flexibility in menu planning. As part of Food Trails, the city promoted food education for pupils aged 10-12 through partnerships with public suppliers, distributing 900 potato-growing kits and providing YouTube lessons on sustainable farming.

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## Funchal

Funchal's Food Strategy focuses on educational activities, integrating food literacy into school programmes, engaging the educational community, and promoting visits to the FunLab – the food sustainability Science Centre.

The city also focuses on healthy cooking workshops, teacher training, and disseminating good practices via leaflets, fun games and a communication plan to further support these efforts.

## Grenoble-Alpes Metropole

The enhancement of food procurement practices towards healthier and sustainable diets in school canteens is being pursued by the Metropole, by supporting its municipalities through a dedicated program with the overall aim of improving children's school diets in a healthier and more sustainable manner. As part of this program efforts have been made to enhance the quality, type and sourcing of food, resulting in a reduction in waste.

## Groningen

In its Food Policy update (June 2024), Groningen focuses on introducing children to healthy and sustainable eating through play. Following a successful Food Trails pilot, cooking workshops will be expanded to all 33 schools with an Extended School Day program. Groningen pupils already receive nature lessons from Nature and Sustainability Education Groningen, and they are now creating recipe cards for school garden produce and offering cooking classes, including for unaccompanied minors. The city is also exploring the integration of healthy eating and cooking into the curriculum.

## Milan

In Milan, school meals are provided by the in-house company Milano Ristorazione, serving 77,000 meals daily. The city has reduced CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions by 42% between 2015 and 2021 by monitoring the environmental impact of procurement. Milan has also fostered city-to-city exchanges on school meals since 2018, sharing its expertise with other cities globally and hosting 47 city delegations. A dedicated project, Healthy Wave, is in place to foster the implementation of the ECG in Milan and 5 other European cities.

Within Food Trails, Milan tested nudging interventions in canteens to enhance meal appreciation and reduce food waste. The municipality renovated five canteens in socio-economically diverse neighborhoods and distributed educational booklets to all kindergartens and primary schools, measuring food waste to assess success.

## Thessaloniki

As part of the Food Trails initiative, Thessaloniki is working to shift students' food habits towards more sustainable practices and promote urban agriculture. The city has implemented a pilot project that established four new vegetable gardens, including two within schoolyards. Key impacts figures include 300 vegetable species, 100 types of herbs, and 250 students involved. The primary goal of this initiative is to connect children with food production and the natural environment, while also transforming their food habits, enhancing their education, and sharing knowledge with their families and communities.



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## Tirana

As part of its Food Trails journey, the city has adopted a local food sourcing strategy aimed at improving both nutrition and sustainability, with benefits extending to kindergarten canteens and individuals in need.

In addition, nutritionists were involved in creating well-balanced menus to ensure optimal dietary value.

Tirana also offers educational programs on sustainable diets and traditional products, often held at the newly launched Agro-Park, located just outside the city.



## Warsaw

Currently, in Warsaw, the school canteens, the preparation and serving of school meals have a hybrid model: the service is provided in different ways, with dedicated staff from schools or from the Municipality, or even outsourced to external companies. Within Food Trails, major efforts have been dedicated to the establishment of a living lab dedicated to food waste reduction and food access, targeting in an initial stage also students. New initiatives may come in the future on the topic.



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## San Sebastian Declaration

Under the Spanish Presidency of the EU Commission, the event “*Guaranteeing a healthy nutrition for all children in the European Union. Towards a greater commitment to the provision of school meals building on the European Child Guarantee*” has been organised with the aim of strengthening the commitment to providing school meals, building upon the foundation laid by the European Child Guarantee.

A full day of roundtables engaging Member States, representatives of the European Institution, academics, civil society and policy expert to highlight the key role of school meals programme in tackling child poverty and social exclusion. Understanding its potentiality and the interconnection with all other social policies has been one of the aim of the conference. A particular focus has been dedicated to understanding how school meals programme are implemented in different contexts, what are the main barrier and what can be done throughout a multilevel and multistakeholder approach.

As a result of the conference, a Declaration has been adopted, stating that:

- the provision of free healthy school meals for each children is one of the main instrument to fight against food insecurity, with positive outcomes for them, their families and the whole society both in short and in long term;
- Member States’ priority should be guaranteeing at least one healthy and free meal each school day to every children in need, progressively expanding the coverage of the service in terms of beneficiaries and time;
- it has emerged the need to develop an effective and reliable monitoring system with precise and comparable indicators.



# EU Child Guarantee & School Meals Programme



The European Child Guarantee represents a critical step toward ensuring that every child in the EU, particularly those at risk of poverty or social exclusion, has access to essential services. By prioritizing the key area of nutrition and access to healthy food choices, the initiative lays the groundwork for improving children's quality of life and addressing inequality while paving a great opportunity for cities to prove their commitment on such a challenge.

For this reason, one of the most significant strategies identified is the provision of free, nutritious school meals, which has been shown to be an effective means of reducing child poverty and enhancing social inclusion.

The success of these initiatives relies heavily on collaboration between governments and local authorities. The San Sebastian Declaration further underscores the growing recognition of the need for collective action to ensure a progress.

In conclusion, the ECG, through a combination of national action plans, feasibility studies, and pilot programs, offers a path forward for addressing child poverty across Europe. Continued collaboration and commitment at both the local and international levels will be key to optimising the impact of these efforts, ensuring that no child is left behind in accessing the basic right to nutrition and essential services.



**Cities  
Feeding  
the Future**

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[www.comune.milano.it/food\\_policy](http://www.comune.milano.it/food_policy)  
[foodpolicy@comune.milano.it](mailto:foodpolicy@comune.milano.it)

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