Contribution of School Meals to Poverty Reduction in Armenia

ELMIRA BAKHSHINYAN, LUCA MOLINAS, HAROLD ALDERMAN

RATIOANLE AND OBJECTIVE
School meal programs are credited with improving food security and encouraging primary school enrollment. They also can serve as a broad-based means to address poverty; that is, they have a role in social protection. The current school meal program in Armenia was prompted, in part, by a 14.1 percent economic contraction in 2009 in the wake of the global economic crisis and has been evolving since 2010.

Armenia has universal school enrollment, not only in the grades covered in the school meal program, but in higher grades as well. While the meal program may assist in classroom attendance and reduce inattention of hungry students, it is not a primary motivation for participation in the educational system. Thus, as a contribution to long term planning of the role of school meal program in Armenia, a study was undertaken to assesses whether the school meal program that originated as a response to the global financial crisis of 2008, serves as a wide but shallow safety net.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL MEALS IN ARMENIA
As of 2018, nearly 100,000 children in grades 0-4 receive school meals daily, with nearly two thirds of these children in programs supported by the World Food Program [WFP] and the remainder in programs administered by the Government. The handover from WFP administration to Government of Armenia provision began in 2014 and is proceeding according to plan with the complete handover in 2023.
RESULTS

The study measured the contribution of the value of the food received by students to poverty reduction and to overall social welfare using data from the 2015 Integrated Living Conditions Survey (ILCS) undertaken by the National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia.

Considering the transfers implicit in the school meals, the proportion of the population that are below the lower poverty line declines by **0.23 percentage points**. This positive yet limited impact reflects the modest size of any income support available in a school lunch, as well as the low relative share of the poor that have primary school aged children receiving a school meal; many poor households do not have a child of school age.

However, households consistently claim that the school meal is worth more to them than the cost to the government; a survey of 1050 households indicated it would cost them nearly twice as much to provide a lunch to their child than the assumed value of the food in the school meal program used in these estimates. Re-estimating the contribution to poverty reduction using this reported value to the household, the poverty reduction is **0.4 percentage points**. Furthermore, at these values and under the additional assumption that the program can be expanded to included Yerevan, the program can reduce poverty by **0.6 percentage points**.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

In comparison, the Family Benefit Program [FBP] with a budget of around $75M in 2015 reduced poverty by 1.3 percentage points. Thus, the FBP remains the cornerstone of social protection in the country, yet since it has a budget approximately 15 times as large as the school meal program, the latter achieved more reduction in poverty per AMD than the former.

DISCUSSION

These results on the cost effectiveness in terms of poverty reduction as well as the indication that households value the meal program can assist in the challenge of transitioning the program from one designed for crisis response and for a low functioning education system to the more robust current school environment.

Potential reforms on the transfer size and targeting criteria of the school meal program are needed if the Government had to set poverty reduction objective for the program.