

Execution of School Feeding Programs in Latin America during the Covid-19 Pandemic from the Perspective of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition (HRAFN): A Scoping Review

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The COVID-19 pandemic impacted several sectors, including school feeding policies in Latin America, and harmed, above all, school-age children and adolescents, since schools closed and classes were interrupted. The aim of this review was to analyze the execution of school feeding programs (SFPs) in Latin America in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition (HRAFN). We undertook a scoping review of articles and official documents in the databases Embase, FSTA, LILACS, PubMed, SciELO, Scopus, and Web of Science, and in official websites and websites of government agencies of Latin American countries. A descriptive synthesis of the data was performed from the perspective of the HRAFN, analyzing whether the availability, accessibility, adequacy, and stability dimensions were guaranteed. A total of 191 texts were located. From these, 107 were selected, including 20 articles and 87 documents. It was found that 3 of the 20 Latin American countries did not maintain SFPs during the pandemic (2020–2022): Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua. Most countries adapted the provision of school feeding to include food baskets, cash transfers, ready meals, or meals prepared at the educational institutions. Regarding accessibility, 45% of the countries served the same beneficiaries who were previously part of the program, while 30% reduced accessibility to only a portion of the public. As for adequacy, 55% of the countries did not specify whether fresh food was provided. Concerning the stability dimension, no texts presented information about the guarantee of the measures carried out regularly during the pandemic. The dimensions of the HRAFN were not fully contemplated during the emergency period, and, therefore, there were several violations of the rights of students who were beneficiaries of SFPs.

Key words: school feeding, public policies, food security, low- and middle-income countries, food assistance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus Disease pandemic (COVID-19) had severe global impacts, with emphasis on the health, social, economic, educational, and food systems.^{1–3} It particularly harmed school-age children and adolescents, since schools were closed in April 2020 in 179 countries, disrupting classes.⁴

Around 1.6 billion students were affected—equivalent to over 90% of the global student population⁵—including 85 million from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).⁶ This situation led to an increase in school dropout rates,^{7,8} a heightened risk of malnutrition,⁹ and a rise in food insecurity,⁶ all of which were associated with psychological and emotional harm.¹⁰

Regarding school feeding, in the pre-pandemic scenario, all countries in the region adopted the modality of meals served in the school environment, with 10 of them (50%) having a universal focus, 5 (25%) a geographical focus, 3 (15%) an individual focus, and 2 (10%) had 2 different focuses according to the school level.^{7,8,11–36}

Latin America has historically faced economic instability, which worsened between 2014 and 2021, as poverty increased from 27.8% to 33.4% and extreme poverty from 7.8% to 13%.³⁷ The pandemic exacerbated this crisis, leading to severe economic, social, and productive challenges.³⁸ In response, each country implemented distinct measures based on its specific context.^{6,10} Given the region's significant social inequities and vulnerable populations, school feeding programs (SFPs) played a vital role during the emergency period.³⁸

Beyond their immediate role in mitigating food insecurity during crises, these programs are critical for ensuring food security and proper development in childhood,³⁹ better cognitive ability,⁴⁰ prevention of diseases,^{7,41} and reduced school dropouts, among other contributions.^{39,40}

Moreover, the Sustainable School Feeding Network supports countries in the region in implementing and reformulating SFPs, promoting the human right to adequate food.⁴² Established in 2018 by the Brazilian Government, through the Brazilian Cooperation Agency and the National Fund for Educational Development, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Sustainable School Feeding Network aims to ensure students have access to healthy, culturally appropriate meals integrated with food and nutrition education.⁴²

Food is also considered an indispensable human right, backed by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), at this

moment. It is from this background that the expression “Human Right to Adequate Food” originates, which has been refined since then.^{43,44} The concept of Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition (HRAFN) is a proposal from the Foodfirst Information and Action Network, a global human rights organization, which incorporates the nutritional dimension into the right to adequate food.^{45,46} Thus, to guarantee this right, some concepts have been defined that must be followed, such as: (i) Availability (directly, from productive land or other natural resources, and indirectly, from food purchased in commerce or obtained through the actions of basic food basket provision, for example); (ii) adequacy (regarding the culture, life cycle stage, nutritional needs, and eating habits); (iii) accessibility (economic and physical—including vulnerable groups); and (iv) stability (respecting that the availability and accessibility to adequate food must be guaranteed stably throughout the year on a regular basis).⁴⁷

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) may have affected the realization of the HRAFN within the framework of SFPs.⁴⁸ A preliminary review of the literature indicates a theoretical gap: While some studies describe operational adjustments to SFPs during the pandemic across various regions^{49–52} and the consequences of the interruption of school meals,⁵³ none offer a comprehensive, critical analysis of Latin America as a whole, nor do they address the 4 fundamental principles—availability, access, adequacy, and stability. Furthermore, these studies have a limited temporal scope and do not assess the period between 2020 and 2022.

Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the execution of SFPs in Latin America in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the HRAFN.

METHODS

Characterization of the Study

This is a scoping review based on the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) handbook, guided by the extension for Scoping Reviews of the “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses” checklist (PRISMA-ScR)⁵⁴ and a protocol registered with the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository, which may be accessed at <https://osf.io/wmfdy/>.

Study Steps

The research question of the review was: How were SFPs in Latin America executed in the context of the

COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the HRAFN?

Eligibility Criteria. With the aim of filling the identified theoretical gap, we included original articles, primary and review, and documentary sources, such as archives of public agencies, letters, bulletins, and research reports that addressed SFPs in Latin American countries; texts produced from March 2020; and texts that addressed SFPs from 2020 to 2022, with publications and availability of the full text and without language restrictions. The inclusion criteria addressed the Population, Concept, and Context (PCC) structure⁵⁴. The Population was understood as the Latin American school community (school staff, volunteers, students, parents/legal guardians)⁵⁵; the Concept was the execution of SFPs from the perspective of the HRAFN; the Context was the COVID-19 pandemic.

We excluded texts that referred to the perception of students, teachers, and nutritionists, the evaluation of preferences, or clinical aspects of COVID-19, texts which had a strict approach to biosafety, or were strictly theoretical, texts that did not clearly address the resources employed to tackle the challenges of SFPs during the pandemic, and news items from institutional websites on the topic.

Search. This step included a mapping in electronic libraries and a search of official documents from Latin American countries. Searches for articles were conducted in Portuguese, English, and Spanish in May 2023. Databases Embase, Food Science and Technology Abstracts (FSTA), Latin America and the Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS), PubMed/Medline, Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Scopus, and the Web of Science were queried. The following descriptors were used, including their synonyms, combining them with Boolean terms: “Alimentação escolar” (“School feeding,” “Programas e Políticas de Nutrição e Alimentação” [“Nutrition and Food Programs and Policies”], “COVID-19,” and “América Latina” (“Latin America”), which are indexed in the Health Sciences Descriptors/Medical Subject Headings (DeCS/MeSH).⁵⁶ In summary, the search strategies included the terms described in **Box S1 (supplementary material)**.

The search for official documents was carried out from May to June 2023 in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. We consulted the websites of government agencies from all Latin American countries, starting with the institutions responsible for social development and/or education of the member countries of the region (**Box S2—supplementary material**). In addition, searches were conducted on the websites of the

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the FAO, and the World Food Program (WFP).

The following keywords were used in the searches, in isolation and combined: “Alimentação escolar” (“School feeding”), “Programa de alimentação escolar” (“School feeding program”), “COVID-19,” “América Latina” (“Latin America”), and the name of the school feeding program of the corresponding country. For institutions with worldwide reach, the search was carried out in the 3 languages, and when a Latin American country was mentioned, these terms were searched according to the local language. To refine the search for articles and documents, filters were applied, such as publication date (from 2020 onwards) and texts that were available for full-text access.

Selection. This step took place from July to August 2023. The titles, abstracts, and keywords of the identified articles were carefully read (Phase 1), and the texts were later read in full (Phase 2). Next, the reference lists of the sources selected for this study were analyzed. To this end, the subject addressed in the title and the publication date were initially identified—a process characterized as the “snowball” technique.⁵⁷ In turn, these documents were identified directly on the defined websites by reading the titles and abstracts—when applicable (Phase 1)—and later read in full (Phase 2).

The scientific articles and official documents considered potentially eligible for inclusion in this review study were selected. Two independent reviewers performed all of these steps, with any divergences being resolved by a third researcher. After mapping, the texts were imported into the Mendeley[®] software, where duplicates were identified by the program itself (based on titles, authors, publication year, and other reference details) and later deleted by the authors. Then the texts were stored on the Rayyan[®] platform for reading, a step in which there was blinding among all researchers.

Data Extraction. The texts were organized in an electronic spreadsheet using Microsoft Office Excel[®] from August to September 2023. Initially, the documentary data were extracted—namely, the country (rows) and month and year of publication (columns). Subsequently, the spreadsheet was filled according to the government measures adopted and the reports issued (laws, decrees, resolutions, ordinances) from 2020 to 2022.

The official documents and reports issued by selected international agencies were organized into 2 separate electronic spreadsheets, after extracting the following information: Country, data source, month/year, brief description, and main results—an item subdivided into the modality of food provision (food baskets/money supply/industrialized ready-to-eat portions/meals prepared at the education institution), the target population, and the provision of fresh food (fruits/vegetables/greens). In addition, a fourth form was structured for extracting data regarding the scientific articles, extracting the titles, authors, month/year of publication, country of origin, objectives, methods, and main results—an item subdivided into the modality of food provision, the target population, and the provision of fresh food.

All these data were extracted for subsequent analysis within the 4 dimensions of HRAFN: (i) availability; (ii) adequacy; (iii) accessibility; and (iv) stability.⁴⁷

Analysis. A descriptive synthesis of the data was carried out from September to November 2023, based on the 4 dimensions of HRAFN, as described below.

The guarantee of the availability dimension from the SFP provision, its execution modality, and the adjustments made amid the COVID-19 pandemic were considered: (i) operational adjustment (continuation of the execution of the existing SFP, but with adjustments in the logistics of supply); (ii) new program (implementation of a new public policy). Accessibility was analyzed according to the beneficiaries served, that is, indicating whether the accessibility was for the program's coverage or whether there was a vertical (expansion of the benefit for the same target audience) or horizontal (expansion of the target audience served) expansion or a reduction in the number of people served. Adequacy was analyzed based on nutritional quality, such as the provision of fresh food. In the stability dimension, the guarantee of the continuity of food availability was considered, as well as accessibility (changes in the coverage of beneficiaries throughout the analyzed period) and adequacy through a comparison of the types of foods offered at different times during the period.

RESULTS

Texts Selected for the Study

A total of 191 texts were identified. Among them, 20 articles and 87 documentary sources were selected, making a total of 107 texts included in the study, according to the PRISMA-ScR flowchart (Figure 1).

Regarding the data source and analysis used in the 20 articles, 16 of them (80%) addressed documentary sources,^{2,6,7,10,58–67} and of these, 6 (38%) also addressed associated bibliographic sources,^{2,41,58–60,68} while 5 (31%) also addressed associated interviews with key actors (managers, teachers, parents of students).^{6,59–62} Finally, of the remaining 4 articles, 3 (15%) focus solely on interviews,^{1,69,70} and 1 (5%) presents a narrative review on the situation of food security during the pandemic.⁷¹ Information such as author, year, and country of publication, objectives, methods, and main results involving the 4 dimensions of HRAFN were extracted.

The country with the highest number of published scientific articles was Brazil, with 14 (70%)^{1,2,6,7,10,41,58,61,62,65,66,68,69,71} of those selected, followed by Colombia, with 3 (15%).^{6,67,68} The other articles addressed Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Argentina, and Venezuela. Nine Latin American countries were not mentioned in any of the selected manuscripts.^{1,2,6,7,10,41,58–71}

As for the 87 selected documents, 78 (90%) addressed government measures (Resolutions/decrees/laws published by each country in Latin America) applied to school feeding during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022,^{72–141} while 9 (10%) referred to reports prepared by international organizations. Of these reports, UNICEF stood out with 4 publications (45%), followed by WFP with 3 (33%), FAO and CELAC combined, with only 1 (11%), and FAO and ECLAC combined, with 1 (11%).^{3,8,140,142–146} The other international agencies, such as UNESCO and PAHO, did not present documents on the topic of interest during the analyzed period.

Regarding the year of publication of all texts included in this study, 80 (75%) were published in 2020,^{2,3,7,36,58,63,65–68,142,143} 22 (21%) in 2021,^{1,6,8,41,59,61,62,69–71,144–146} 4 (3%) in 2022,^{61,69,70,146} and only 1 (1%) in 2023.⁶⁰ Considering that the review took place between July and November 2023, an update of this research is necessary to address possible articles that may have been published afterwards.

Implementation of Government Measures for School Feeding Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Latin American countries closed schools partially or entirely at some points in the pandemic scenario, with the majority (19%) implementing some government measure for school feeding (Table 1).^{72–141} The exceptions occurred in Cuba and Haiti. No document pertaining to the legal framework published from 2020 to 2022 concerning SFPs during the COVID-19 pandemic was located for these 2 countries. One difference between the 2 countries was that, although no

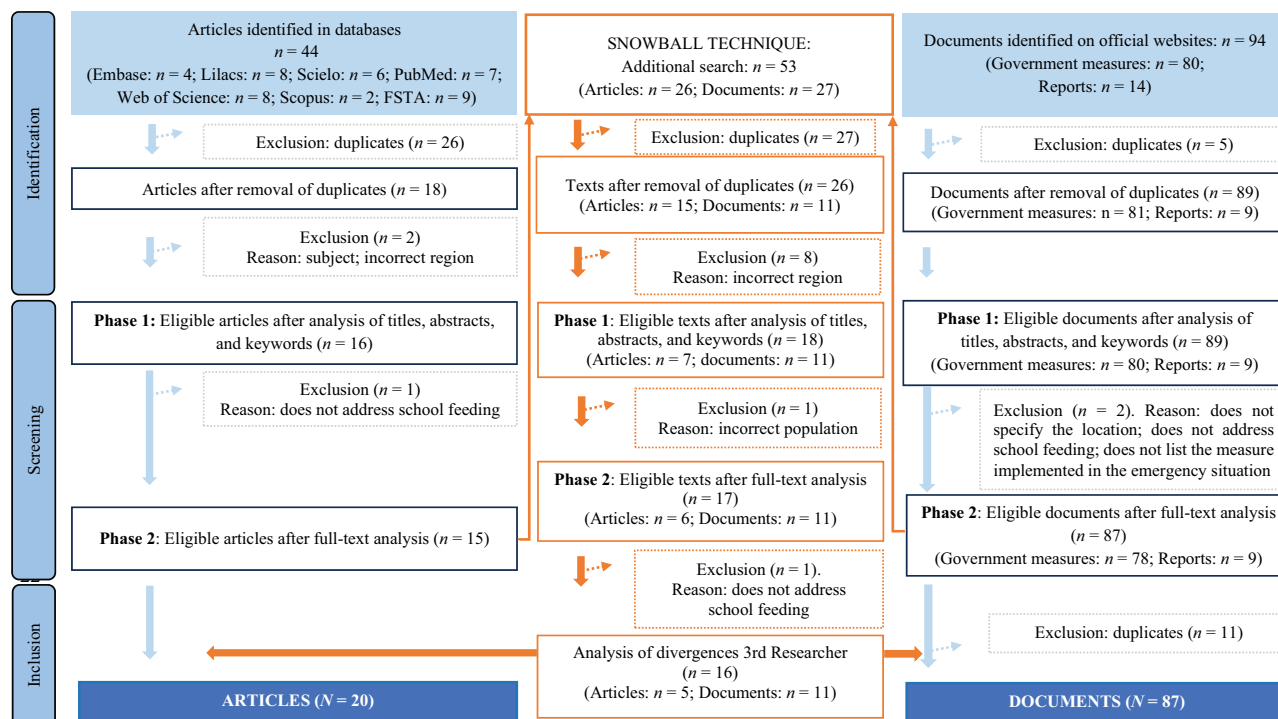


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR Flowchart of the Texts Included in the Coping Review

government measures were published during the analyzed period in Haiti, school feeding was distributed from external aid¹⁴⁵; no measures involving the help of international institutions were located in Cuba.

The countries that stood out in terms of the extent of published legal frameworks were Uruguay ($n = 14$), Colombia ($n = 12$), Brazil ($n = 7$), Peru ($n = 7$), and Argentina ($n = 6$), an important characteristic, as these documents aim to establish standards and define appropriate conduct in response to emergency situations. However, as revealed, although some countries implemented legal frameworks, no informative or complementary materials were located regarding the execution of school feeding during the pandemic in Colombia and Peru.

In contrast, Brazil, Chile, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela published texts, such as recommendations, primers, guides, and protocols, with the aim of proposing strategies for the execution of school feeding during the pandemic period, the operation of schools, and food distribution with practices to avoid COVID-19 contagion,^{87,90,94,118–121,132,135} about the assembly of food kits, the acquisition of family farming goods, public calls, and examples of food and nutrition education activities adapted to the pandemic.^{84,85}

Figure 2 illustrates a time frame of the government measures developed during the pandemic period

analyzed. It was observed that 13 countries (65%) already had government initiatives in March 2020, while 4 (20%) published measures the following month (April), 1 (5%) published a guideline only in September of the same year, and 2 (10%) did not publish any measures. These initiatives include laws/resolutions/decrees regarding the closure of schools and the initiation of SFPs in response to the pandemic, such as the adoption of alternative feeding modalities for students.^{72,80,94,97,115}

Although some countries presented a longer time frame of implemented measures, only Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay presented a continuity of publications—with a prominence of Uruguay, which, in addition to the greater absolute number of measures, also presented shorter intervals between measures.

Execution of School Feeding from the Perspective of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition

Different strategies were adopted to maintain the operation of school feeding. Table 2^{1–3,6–8,10,24–36,41,56–58,68} presents the analysis of the execution of SFPs during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022 from the perspective of the HRAFN, considering the availability, accessibility, adequacy and stability dimensions.

It was not possible to analyze the dimensions for Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua, 15% of the countries; although the latter presented the legal framework of its

Table 1. Implementation of Governmental Measures by Latin American Countries from 2020 to 2022 According to Legal Frameworks and Informative Materials

Countries	Implementation of government measures	
	Legal landmarks	Information material
Argentina	Resolution 2020/108; Decree 297/2020; Decree 325/2020; Decree 408/20; Decree 259/2020; Decree 493/2020	- Federal Guide of Recommendations (version 1) - Federal Guide of Recommendations (version 2)
Bolivia	Decree No. 4197; Decree No. 4199; Decree No. 4205; Decree No. 4210	–
Brazil	Law No. 13987; Resolution No. 02, 2020; Resolution No. 06, 2020; Resolution No. 07, 2020; Resolution No. 10, 2020; Resolution 20/2020; Resolution 21/2021	- Primer—Directions for executing the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) - Frequently asked questions about the execution of the PNAE during the Coronavirus pandemic - Recommendations for executing the National School Feeding Program in the return to in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic: Food and nutrition education and food security
Chile	Resolution No. 2504	- Guidelines for the operation of the SFP in COVID-19 contingency - Mineduc Covid-19 Guidelines
Colombia	Circular No. 1; Decree 470; Directive No. 005; Resolution 006; Circular No. 02; Circular No. 03; Decree 533; Resolution 007; Law 2042; Resolution 777; Circular No. 009; Resolution No. 00335	–
Costa Rica	Resolutions 2382-2020-MEP-0537-2020; Resolution MEP-0555-03-2020; Resolution MEP-0585-2020	–
Cuba	–	–
Dominican Republic	INABIE/DIAN Communiqué No. 25/2020	–
El Salvador	Interinstitutional cooperation agreement	–
Ecuador	National COE Res. of April 09; Decree No. 1346	–
Guatemala	Ministerial Agreement 825-2020; Decree No. 12-2021	–
Haiti	^a	^a
Honduras	Circular Letter No. 017-SE-2020	– School feeding delivery protocol.
Mexico	–	Preventive Measures and Recommendations for the Operation of Social Food Assistance and Community Development Programs
Nicaragua	–	Practical Guide to SNDIF Food Programs Guide: National Strategy of the Elementary and Secondary Education Subsystem to tackle the challenge of the pandemic
Panama	Decree No. 400	–
Paraguay	Resolution 351-2020; Resolution 372-2020	–
Peru	Res.091-2020-MINEDU; Legislative Decree 1472; Res. 000143-2020; Res.176-2020-MINEDU; Res. D000189-2020-MIDIS/PNAEQW; Res.000218-2020; Res. 32-2021-MIDIS/PNAEQW	–
Uruguay	Communiqué 1; Communiqué 56; Circular 47; Res. No. 63; Circular 68; Circular 86; Minutes 54 Res.4; Minutes 67 Res. 21; Minutes 2 Res. 3; Communiqué 14; Communiqué 26; Communiqué 15 07; Communiqué 17; Communiqué 24	Protocol of action in the CAIF Centers and <i>Nuestros Niños</i>.
Venezuela	–	Protocol of measures to prevent the risk of food contamination and disease transmission with an emphasis on preventing the transmission of COVID-19 in the School Feeding Service – Pedagogical plan for Coronavirus prevention and protection

Prepared by the author (2023).^{72–141}^aNo initiative of its own; presented only external support.

program, it did not expose records regarding its execution.

Regarding the food availability dimension, it was observed that the other 17 countries acted differently, with the provision of adapted school feeding in the

following modalities: (i) food baskets (set of foods that may include items such as grains, cereals, legumes, fruits, dairy products, and canned goods), (ii) money supply (voucher/food card/rechargeable debit card), (iii) industrialized ready-to-eat portions, and (iv) meals

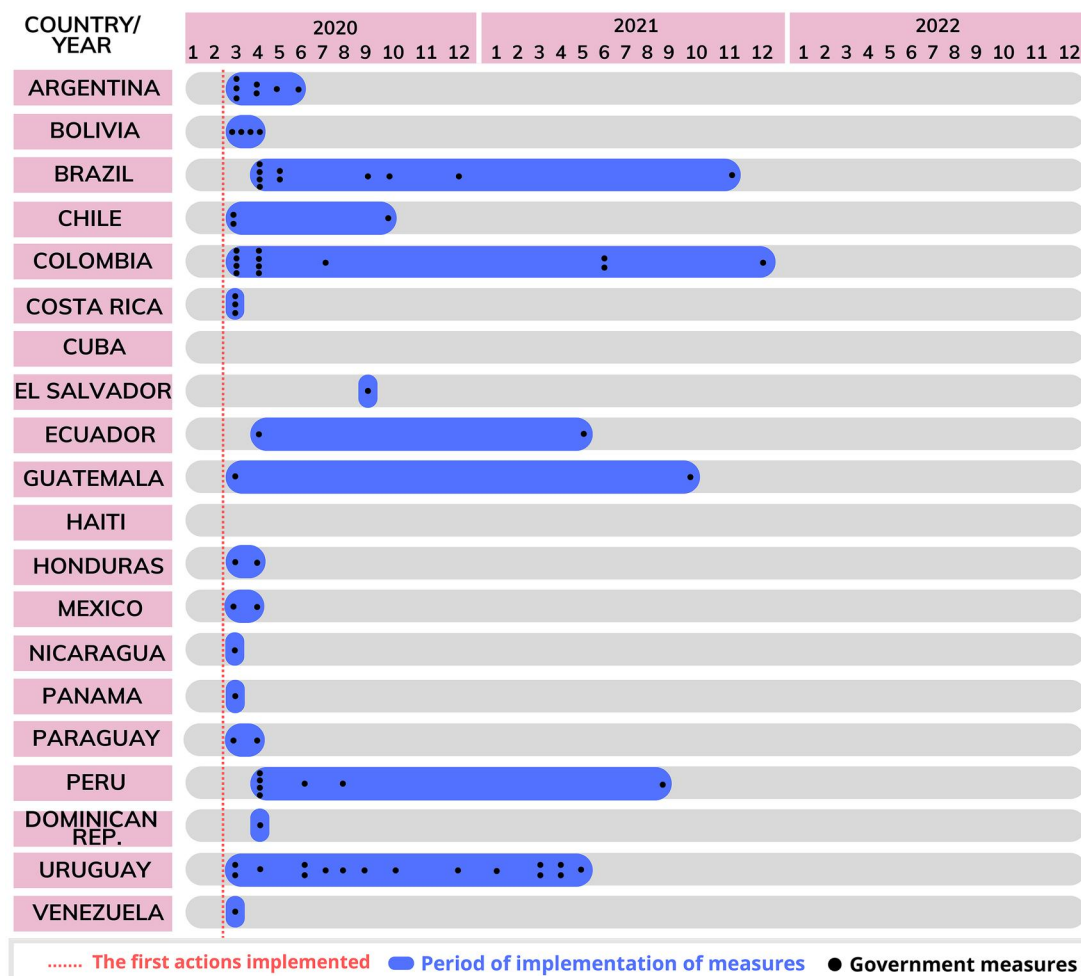


Figure 2. Time Frame of Government Measures Adopted by Latin American Countries for Executing the School Feeding Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic from 2020 to 2022

prepared at the educational institutions.^{1-3,6-8,10,41,58-71,140-146}

As for the modality adopted, 17 countries (85%) opted for food baskets, with Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay adopting more than 1 strategy.^{3,141,142,145} In addition to their own initiatives, some countries, such as Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala, received external support from the World Food Program to provide baskets.^{3,145} In Haiti, there were no initiatives of their own, only international aid.^{3,145,146}

In 15 countries (75%), there were operational adjustments, ie, the execution of the existing SFPs continued, but with adaptations in the logistics of the provision. However, in 2 countries (10%), the implementation of new public policies to meet the demands was observed: In Bolivia, the “*Bono Familia*” was implemented, a monetary aid for families with school-age children, which was extended 3 times from March to April 2020.⁸⁰⁻⁸² In turn, in Panama, the new program installed was named “*Panamá Solidario*”

(Solidarity Panama),¹²² and it was not specific to SFP students, but integrated into it was the “*Estudiar Sin Hambre*” (Study without Hunger) program—one of Panama’s 2 SFPs that was in its implementation phase at the end of 2019 (Law No. 115/2019).

Regarding the accessibility dimension of the HRAFN, it was observed that 10 countries (50%) served the same beneficiaries who were previously part of the programs, while 5 (25%) reduced the accessibility to only a portion of the coverage, usually to people with scarce resources who were socially vulnerable. This reduction occurred mainly due to the challenges posed by the lack of budget for the execution of the SFP and the mobility restrictions during the pandemic, directly impacting the lives of these students and families, and, consequently, the HRAFN.⁸ The Brazilian case stood out, in which some regions had no accessibility to school feeding in 2020.⁶⁵ In the other 2 countries (10%), Bolivia¹⁴⁵ and Peru,^{8,142,146} there was an expansion in the number of people served beyond the beneficiaries of the SFPs. Thus, studies indicate that the target

Table 2. Strategies Adopted by Latin American Countries for Executing the School Feeding Programs (SFPs) during the COVID-19 Pandemic from 2020 to 2022 According to the Availability, Accessibility, and Adequacy Dimensions of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition (HRAFN)

Countries/ dimensions of the HRAFN	Availability		Access		Adequacy	Stability
	SFP provision modality	Adaptation ^{a,b}	Target population	Adaptation ^{c,d}	Nutritional quality (provision of fresh food) ^e	Success of the accessibility, suitability, and availability dimensions
Argentina	Food baskets Prepared meals	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Bolivia	Food baskets (WFP) Money supply	New program	Students who were SFP beneficiaries + expansion to students with dis- ability, private school students	Horizontal expansion	N/S	N/S
Brazil	Food baskets Prepared meals Money supply	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficia- ries/students who were beneficia- ries of direct cash transfer programs	Reduction of the cover- age (depending on the region)	Fruits, vegeta- bles, and greens (only in some locations)	N/S
Chile	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	Fruits, greens, vegetables, and eggs	N/S
Colombia	Food baskets (WFP) Industrialized portion Money supply	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Costa Rica	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Cuba	—	—	—	—	—	N/S
Dominican Republic	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Ecuador	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
El Salvador	Food baskets (WFP)	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficia- ries/Families of the public educa- tion sector identified according to the country's Poverty Map	Reduction of the cover- age (depending on the region)	N/S	N/S
Guatemala	Food baskets (WFP)	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	1st food delivery: No provision. Later: The WFP assisted	N/S
Haiti	—	—	—	—	—	—
Honduras	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	1st delivery: Students who were SFP beneficiaries; Later deliveries: Students from vul- nerable areas	Reduction of the coverage	No provision	N/S
Mexico	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Most vulnerable families based on a needs assessment	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Nicaragua	—	—	—	—	—	—

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Countries/ dimensions of the HRAFN	Availability		Access		Adequacy	Stability
	SFP provision modality	Adaptation ^{a,b}	Target population	Adaptation ^{c,d}		
Panama	Food baskets	New program	Students in a state of poverty; people who lived in areas of difficult access; self-employed people	Reduction of the coverage	N/S	N/S
Paraguay	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Institutions in poverty areas and those with larger populations of students with scarce resources	Reduction of the coverage	No provision	N/S
Peru	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries + expansion to Indigenous peoples of Amazonas and adults and children in vulnerable situations	Horizontal expansion	N/S	N/S
Uruguay	Food baskets Prepared meals Money supply	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S
Venezuela	Food baskets	Operational adjustment	Students who were SFP beneficiaries	Same coverage	N/S	N/S

^aOperational adjustment: Continuation of the execution of the existing SFP, but with adjustments in the logistics of provision.

^bNew program: Implementation of a new public policy to meet the demands of the SFP.

^cVertical expansion: Same target population, but with an expansion of the benefit received.

^dHorizontal expansion: Expansion of the target population served.

^eFresh food: Unprocessed (or natural) foods that are edible parts of plants (seeds, fruits, leaves, stems, roots or animals (muscles, viscera, eggs, milk), and also fungi, algae, and water, after separation from nature. Prepared by the author (2023).^{1-3,6-8,10,24-36,41,56-58,68}

Abbreviations: N/S, not specified; WFP, World Food Program.

population primarily consisted of students who were beneficiaries of the SFP, as well as students with disabilities, students from private schools (Bolivia), individuals from vulnerable families, self-employed workers (El Salvador and Mexico), students from institutions located in poverty-stricken areas (Paraguay), and indigenous populations (Peru).^{1-3,6-8,10,24-36,41,56-58,68}

Concerning the adequacy dimension of the HRAFN, it was noted that 12 countries (60%) did not specify whether fresh food was provided as a way to ensure the nutritional quality of school meals offered during the pandemic. Two countries (10%), Honduras and Paraguay, reported that fresh food was not included. In turn, although it did not add fresh food in the first provision, 1 country (5%), Guatemala, made the inclusion later when the WFP assisted the country's program.¹⁴⁵ This scenario reflects a challenge regarding the dimension of adequacy, as there was a greater presence of processed foods, including ready-to-eat industrial portions. Only in 2 other countries (10%), Chile and Brazil, there was the provision of vegetables, greens, fresh food, and eggs.^{10,47,60,62,143}

Regarding the stability dimension—which reflects the success of the food accessibility, adequacy, and availability dimensions—no text presented information about the guarantee of the measures carried out regularly during the pandemic, pointing to the neglect of this aspect in the conducting of the SFPs throughout the health crisis. This lack of information can be explained by the scarcity of studies and research designs that did not explore the topic over an extended period.

Challenges Faced

Of the texts reviewed, only 13 (12%) addressed the challenges of maintaining school feeding during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru.^{1,2,7,8,20,41,60-62,65,67,68,70} A common issue in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia was the limited provision of food from family farming, mainly due to distribution logistics, which affected meal quality.^{1,2,8,41,68} The pandemic also impacted food prices, purchasing logistics, and product availability in these countries. Other challenges included delays in school feeding delivery, nondistribution of proposed bonuses (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru),^{8,60,70} budget constraints (Brazil and Honduras),^{8,41,61} mobility restrictions due to cordons sanitaires (Honduras and Peru),⁸ and disruptions caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota in Guatemala.⁸

DISCUSSION

The majority of the reviewed literature consisted of document reviews extracted from international organizations and, to a lesser extent, from scientific journals. Significant differences were observed in the volume of scientific production on the topic between the countries. Only 11 of them analyzed the operation of their SFPs during the pandemic, and among them, Brazil stood out with 70% of the set of published information. This was possibly due to the history of the Brazilian SFP and its legislation, which has shown progress since its creation.¹⁴⁷ Regarding the mapped documentation, there was also an inequality of publications, especially of government measures implemented during the analyzed period. This was possibly due to the more significant accessibility of information on the websites of some countries.

Before the pandemic period, the SFPs available in Latin American countries had the modality of meals or snacks served at the schools. The results of this study reveal that, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, heterogeneous strategies were observed to maintain the availability of food to the beneficiary students, with the most-used modality being the provision of food baskets, followed, to a lesser extent, by mixed strategies (the reviewed articles and documents do not mention whether this approach had any advantages compared with others).^{60,68,70,145}

Another point portrayed was that most Latin American countries implemented initiatives in March 2020, which characterized some readiness on the part of these countries compared with others. However, this scenario did not guarantee that school feeding was available stably throughout the analyzed period, even though some countries presented a more significant number of government measures in shorter intervals (Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay). In Colombia, for example, even though regulations were established quickly, there was significant difficulty in reviewing contracts with local operators to implement the new modalities.⁸ It is noteworthy that Uruguay, in addition to having the highest absolute number of implemented measures, is also among the countries that closed schools for a reduced period (between 10 and 20 weeks).¹⁴⁸ In contrast, Cuba and Haiti (where schools closed for 10 to 20 weeks), and Nicaragua (where schools closed only partially throughout the analyzed period) did not implement any measures, demonstrating the disparity of responses among countries and suggesting that the lack of a structured response may have compromised health and education in these regions.

With the conversion of school feeding to new models, there were limitations in ensuring access to food for children and adolescents.⁸ This was due to the difficulty in monitoring the food deliveries,^{8,10} in addition to the reports of spoiled food being delivered,⁶⁰ thus generating a situation of violation of the HRAFN of the students and their families.^{140,146} Only 1 of the articles⁶⁰ directly analyzed the effectiveness of the interventions, limiting the possibility of inferences.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that the money transfers were insufficient for large purchases, since there was an increase in the price of cooking gas and the budgets were limited to making purchases at local retail suppliers.^{1,60} These new models did not ensure that a family would have the resources to prepare the food delivered to them, due to lack of income that already existed or was accentuated by the pandemic.^{8,60,140} The literature also indicates that the transfer of money or the distribution of food baskets did not guarantee the adequate distribution of resources, nor did it ensure the presence of someone to cook or even carry out the adequate preparation of the received products.¹

In summary, regarding the availability dimension of the HRAFN, most countries in the region sought to somehow make the provision of school feeding available at some point during the pandemic. However, the solutions found to maintain the availability of school feeding did not guarantee the quantity or nutritional quality of the meals received.^{1,8,144}

It was also observed that there was a fragile intra-federative relationship in some countries, that is, the texts in this study exposed that, although national governments proposed specific regulatory measures, subnational governments acted according to their local reality and, therefore, often did not make food available according to what had been proposed. This was the case in Brazil,^{84,85} which proposed the distribution of food baskets but, in practice, also adopted other modalities, such as money supply and meals prepared in the educational institutions.^{10,41,61}

This also occurred in Panama,¹²⁴ where the distribution of food baskets and money supply (with solidarity bonus and a digital voucher) was proposed, but, in practice, only the baskets were distributed.⁸ In the case of Nicaragua, the delivery of school feeding was proposed¹²¹; however, no documents were identified that reported how it actually occurred in the closed schools.

The HRAFN was also disrespected when, according to the accessibility dimension, countries such as Brazil, Honduras, Panama, and Paraguay reduced the number of beneficiaries amid the pandemic.^{7,12,68,123,124} It was observed that these countries focused on children and adolescents in situations of vulnerability and poverty

after they had proposed to serve all public-school students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or area of residence.¹¹ Hence, the principle of universality of these SFPs was not met, and many students who were beneficiaries before the pandemic were no longer served, which can lead to the marginalization of groups that, while not the most vulnerable, also face difficulties.

A similar situation was described in a previous study that compared school meal distribution operations related to COVID-19 in 4 United States school districts (Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Houston). In this 2020 study, McLoughlin et al¹⁴⁹ reported that most meal distribution sites were also located only in high-poverty areas.

It was also observed that the adequacy dimension was not guaranteed to the SFP beneficiaries during the pandemic. Over half of the Latin American countries did not mention whether fresh food was offered. In turn, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, and Ecuador^{76,78,85,86,104,114,115,132} proposed that fresh food be provided for consumption. Brazil and Ecuador specified that these foods should originate from family farming, and only Brazil and Chile detailed which fresh foods should be distributed—fruits, vegetables, greens, and eggs.^{10,60,61,68,143}

Although these countries mentioned the provision of fresh food, only Brazil (in some regions) and Chile carried it out.^{60,69} Thus, the lack of fresh food and the distribution of food not purchased from local producers also violated the normative regulations of these countries and of the programs that relied on this provision, in addition to impacting the nutritional quality of the diet and the adequate development in childhood.³⁹

Regarding the acquisition of food from family farming, it should be noted that, in the Brazilian case, it was determined that at least 30% of the resources allocated to the execution of the program should be intended for the direct purchase of food from these producers.¹⁴⁷ In Guatemala, it was also pre-established that 50% of the purchases for the program should come from small producers, and this fraction should increase to 70% after 5 years.²⁵ However, during the pandemic, the measures adopted by the country did not mention this obligation and even proposed that only nonperishable food be distributed.¹¹⁵

According to articles from Brazil⁶⁹ and Chile,⁶⁰ during the school closures, the food baskets provided contained small amounts of fruits and greens and higher amounts of energy foods with excess sodium, in addition to more significant food monotony compared with the menus served at the schools. Therefore, upon adapting the SFP and opting for a new model of food provision, it would be necessary for those in charge to maintain these foods provided by local producers (when

requested) and ensure, in addition to availability and accessibility, the adequacy of nutrient intake, since the absence of specific food groups (such as fruits and greenery) and the increase in ultra-processed products decreased the nutritional quality of the diet of these students.^{6,8}

Finally, although some countries presented successful experiences regarding the provision of school feeding, as was the case in Bolivia and Peru—which reached other population groups in addition to the original beneficiaries of their programs—they also had challenges related to delays in food deliveries and monitoring of the SFPs during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

Therefore, the noncompliance with the promotion of the HRAFN in school feeding during the emergency period disproportionately affected already vulnerable groups, especially school-aged children and adolescents.^{58,61,65,69,71} This reflects the deeply unequal impact of the pandemic and the persistence of social and health inequities. In this context, the noncompliance or ineffectiveness of SFPs, regardless of degree, carries serious consequences.^{9,10,150}

Considering that the countries in the region are parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights¹⁵⁰ and the Sustainable School Feeding Network,⁴⁴ it is striking that the HRAFN was not, in general terms, guaranteed over the period. For such, it is necessary for civil society to understand food and, more specifically, school feeding as a fundamental human right, demanding its guarantee.⁴⁴ However, despite the measures implemented during the pandemic to maintain and uphold the functioning of SFPs, there was no guarantee that students were effectively nourished.⁸

As pointed out by Ribeiro-Silva et al (2020), “there is an urgent need for ways out that place dignity and life at the center of public decisions and policies, safeguarding HUMAN RIGHTS” (our translation, emphasis added). Hence, these countries, signatories of international pacts to guarantee human rights and the HRAFN, will be able to hold debates to implement, strengthen, and expand proposals for efficient SFPs capable of tackling health crises, guaranteeing feeding as a right of all human beings.¹⁵¹

Strengths and Limitations

It is recognized that the use of secondary data as the primary source in this study limited the level of detail of the information and more in-depth analysis of cases. Because this is a contemporary theme, there was a need for very recent publications; the difficulty of obtaining of articles and documents and the lack of accessibility of

information on institutional websites were considered weaknesses in the preparation of this document.

However, due to the methodological rigor of the scoping review, this study became reproducible by other researchers. It is also noteworthy that there was no language limitation, since the researchers involved are native to Latin America and mastered the languages in which the articles were written. Also, to minimize possible bias regarding data selection, this step was carried out by more than 1 reviewer. Another strong point to be considered is the social relevance of this topic for the school community, the geographic scope, and the possibility of extending the research in other emergencies.

This review sought to overcome gaps in the literature on this topic. Lastly, we emphasize that the results of this study may contribute to guaranteeing the HRAFN within the scope of public policies and programs that involve school feeding in Latin America. Examining the potential and limitations of the strategies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic may contribute to guaranteeing the HRAFN in other situations that seriously compromise accessibility to school feeding, such as emergencies resulting from extreme weather events—the frequency of which has been increasing worldwide. As with the pandemic, they have particularly severe repercussions in low- and middle-income countries and in the least privileged segments of their populations.¹⁵²

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that, although 17 countries made various adaptations in the face of the limitations that the pandemic imposed on their continuity, the responses found could not fully guarantee the HRAFN during the period, mainly because the quantity and/or nutritional quality were not assured in the meals received and because there was a reduction in student coverage. It is possible to state that, during the emergency period, there were violations of the HRAFN among SFP beneficiaries in all Latin American countries. Three countries did not maintain their SFPs in force during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. The relevance of this study is noted in the face of the socio-political fragilities of this territory during the pandemic period, highlighting the need to strengthen the SFPs, regardless of emergency situations, so that new health crises or extreme weather events can be faced without violations of the HRAFN.

Profound social and economic inequalities mark the region, and it was noted that the impacts observed in the SFPs during the pandemic were also unequally distributed in the populations of its countries. Even countries with a universal focus reduced the number of

beneficiaries, thereby failing to adhere to the principle of universality in SFP.^{22,75,141,142}

The need to take into account these inequalities in the restructuring of the SFPs after the pandemic is highlighted. The development of equitable strategies, both between countries and internally within countries, is a fundamental step in the struggle to guarantee the HRAFN for students in the various countries of Latin America, including in any new emergency scenarios.

Finally, it is suggested that more studies are conducted on this topic, with distinct and complementary designs, such as research that may analyze the stability dimension of the HRAFN across all of Latin America. In this regard, we suggest the use of longitudinal designs to track changes over time, as well as mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative techniques. We also recommend consulting with managers or territorial references of the Latin American countries and, if feasible, involving the beneficiaries in order to assess the post-pandemic impact, expand the set of information, and assist in future decision-making and participation.

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Supplementary Material

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Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

Data Availability

The data underlying this review are available in the article and its online [supplementary material](#).

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