

Drawing on his experience with the 'School Support Program', **Nirash Dulal**, formerly a Project Associate at Social Lab Nepal examines the gaps and significance of Nepal's Mid-Day Meal initiative. First published in NPJOR, this excerpt highlights key insights from his study.



# Bridging Hunger and Learning: Why Mid-Day Meals Matter in Nepal

Education is not only about classrooms and textbooks. It begins with a child's ability to focus, engage, and learn. For that, nutrition is fundamental. A hungry child cannot learn effectively, and this reality has driven governments worldwide to adopt school feeding programs. Today, more than 400 million children across 148 countries benefit from mid-day meals. Nepal joined this global effort formally in 2020/21, launching the Vidhyalaya Diwa Khaja program in partnership with the World Food Programme.



“ Because ultimately, a nation that cannot feed its children cannot expect them to learn.



In Kathmandu Valley, where urban poverty and food insecurity coexist, the program has shown promising results. Interviews with principals, teachers, and focal persons across five public schools reveal that mid-day meals have significantly boosted attendance, reduced absenteeism, and improved classroom engagement. One principal reported daily attendance rates as high as 98%, noting that many parents, often wage laborers, struggle to prepare meals before work. For these families, the school meal is not just nutrition; it is an incentive for children to attend regularly.





Teachers also observed that well-fed students are more active, attentive, and perform better academically. “A hungry stomach is never ready for learning,” one veteran teacher remarked, pointing to improved exam results since the program began. Beyond academics, students are healthier, with fewer cases of gastritis, coughs, and stomach problems conditions previously linked to junk food consumption.

Yet, despite these successes, challenges remain. Infrastructure is a major concern. Many schools lack proper kitchens, storage facilities, or dining spaces. During monsoon seasons, poorly built kitchens are often unusable, disrupting meal distribution. Financial constraints compound the problem. The government currently allocates NPR 15 per child per day (NPR 20 in Karnali), but inflation has made it difficult to provide balanced meals with fruits, dairy, or protein. Teachers and school helpers often shoulder the burden of cooking and distribution without additional support or pay.

Monitoring and accountability are also weak. Reports from the Auditor General highlight irregularities, with only 40% of schools maintaining proper records of meal distribution. Without systematic oversight, quality and hygiene standards risk being compromised.

Despite these hurdles, innovative practices offer hope. Home-grown school feeding initiatives in districts like Sindhupalchowk and Bardiya have successfully linked local farmers, mothers’ groups, and cooperatives to meal preparation. This not only improves nutrition but also strengthens community ownership and supports local economies. Such localized models could be scaled across Nepal to enhance sustainability.

The evidence is clear: mid-day meals are more than food. They are an investment in education, health, and equity. For Nepal, strengthening this program means increasing funding, improving infrastructure, and embedding community participation. As the country strives to meet its development goals, ensuring that every child receives a nutritious meal at school is not charity; it is a necessity.