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School meals for vulnerable children: service provision in times of crisis

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Introduction

School meals for vulnerable children: service provision in times of crisis.

School meals programs can be crucial for children's educational performance and health, especially for the most vulnerable children. The history of free meals provision to schoolchildren in country X can be traced back to the 1900s, when, after 40 years of implementing compulsory elementary schooling, hundreds of thousands of poor children regularly went to school underfed. Since the very beginning of the policy, local entities have been in charge of channeling resources to provide food for children. At first, they did so on a voluntary basis, but as many did not deliver, new legislation in the 1940s obliged local entities to provide a midday meal and set nutritional guidelines for meal programs funded with local taxes. In 1949, since providing meals for all schoolchildren was too costly, the ruling party at that time (a left-wing party) allowed the local entities to charge a fixed price per meal while still providing some meals free of charge to disadvantaged schoolchildren. In the 1980s, the Education Act of the time removed the obligation to provide school meals except for pupils whose parents were receiving supplementary benefits or family income support.

Currently, under the government's school food plan (2013), all children from four (the first year of compulsory education) to seven years old who attend a government-funded school can apply for the free meals scheme regardless of socioeconomic situation. In addition, since 2014, more secondary school pupils (12-16 years old) and primary schoolchildren (4-11 years old) are applying for and receiving school meals. Free meals for disadvantaged children (from disadvantaged backgrounds and looked-after children) are increasingly being provided.

The take-up of free meals for primary schoolchildren from four to seven years old increased sharply under the 2008/09 economic crisis austerity measures in the country. In 2013-14, these accounted for 38% of the estimated average number of school lunches eaten in public schools, rising to 80% in 2015-16. This trend also covers the use of food banks and schemes to provide free meals to schoolchildren during school holidays.

X is a country with a population of 65 million people. It has a high Human Development Index, and is also ranked as a high-income country. Nevertheless, OECD figures suggest that currently, the country has among the highest levels of income inequality compared with other European Union countries (as measured by the Gini coefficient).

For years, the country has needed to reform social policies to reduce social exclusion and poverty. Here "people in relative poverty" refers to those living in households with incomes below 60% of the median in that year. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, national statistics estimated that, based on household income, 18% of individuals lived in relative poverty before subtracting housing costs (that is, 11.7 million people). This percentage rises to 22% after subtracting housing costs (14.5 million people). Looking specifically at children, there were 3.2 million children living in households that were in relative poverty before deducting housing costs (23% of children), and there were 4.3 million living in households that were in relative poverty after deducting housing costs (31%). At the end of 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that the number of people living in relative poverty had increased from 14.5 million to over 15 million people after taking housing costs into account.

Regarding politics in the country, the right-wing party (the ruling party) has been in power for over 10 years. The party has had an overall majority in parliament since the last elections held before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Ideologically conservative, this right-wing party has focused on policy-making centered on the economy and based on the principles of the free market and individual freedom, rejecting state intervention in social policies. The most important party in the opposition is a left-wing party. Ideologically defined as a social-democrat political party, it has backed ideas of redistribution of wealth through taxation and a wider-reaching welfare state, including publicly-funded healthcare. The right-wing party and the left-wing party have alternated in government since the Second World War.

Currently, the country is suffering a COVID-19 pandemic that has severely impacted large swathes of the population, both socially and economically. After the outbreak of the pandemic, the central government approved a local support grant in order to expand the food program through which schools provide free meals to all children between the ages of four and seven years, as well as to schoolchildren who meet the benefits-related free school meals

eligibility criteria (disadvantaged and looked after children). Before the school summer holidays, the central government pledged to continue providing meals over the holiday period to children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. In autumn, after the school year had already begun, the prime minister declared that the free meal program would not be extended to the following (autumn) school holidays.

The prime minister's decision has raised concerns among different social and political actors across country X, who have made different public statements about it. Social rights associations and charities have reacted to the national government's position with outrage. Notably, a very popular footballer (public figure) with strong connections to the NGO sector has declared that vulnerable families cannot bear the burden of providing food to their children if they do not have the means to do so. This public figure has asked the national government to fulfill its responsibilities and extend the free meals policy over the next holidays (that is, extending the free meals policy beyond the summer holidays). He has mobilized the social networks to back his position. A letter that he wrote on the topic has been circulated on social media and endorsed by thousands of people.

A public figure (policy entrepreneur), together with other key actors, wants to urge the national government to perform a U-turn on the policy. To do this, the public figure knows that there are two legally established mechanisms envisaged that could pressure the national government into changing its policy, and expand the provision of free meals to include the future school holidays:

- **A Parliamentary motion.** A proposal put forward by a Member of Parliament for debate or decision in Parliament. [Strategy 1]
- **A Parliament petition.** A procedure that can be put forward by a citizen to oblige Parliament and the national government to discuss a certain demand. [Strategy 2]

Which of the two strategies could best support the public figure's goals?

[Once you have read the description of the actors involved in the case, choose the strategy that best supports the public figure's goals.]

[If you choose strategy 1, go to page 8]

[If you choose strategy 2, go to page 10]

Actors

The national government

The Prime Minister leads the national government with the support of the cabinet.

Ideologically conservative, the Prime Minister is ultimately responsible for all policy and decisions. The cabinet is made up of the Prime Minister and ministers. It is the main collective decision-making body of the national government (there are currently 22 cabinet ministers).

In addition to carrying out other functions, the Prime Minister is the principal government figure in Parliament. When Parliament is in session, every week, the cabinet members meet to discuss the most important issues for the government. The ministries and their agencies are responsible for putting government policy into practice. Two ministries are especially relevant to this case: The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance. On the one hand, the Ministry of Education is responsible for children's services and education, including policy for early years, primary and secondary schools, higher and further education. Among its responsibilities, the Ministry of Education makes sure that local services protect and support children; to do so, it works closely with local councils. Under the Minister of Education, the head of the Department for Children is responsible for children's social care, including the system overall, its funding and workforce, child protection, children in care, adoption, young people leaving care, and local authority performance. On the other hand, the Ministry of Finance is the government's economic and treasury ministry. This body maintains control over public spending, including ministries' spending, annually managed expenditure and welfare policy.

Right-wing local councils

These are local councils that have a majority of elected representatives from the right-wing party.

Local councils have suffered severe spending cuts, exacerbated by the austerity measures implemented to cope with the 2008/09 financial crisis.

Local councils are considered local entities (institutions and bodies belonging to the local government system in country X). This local governance system is made up of a distribution of functions that varies across the territory depending

on local arrangements. Except for the country's capital, where there is some devolution of power, legislation concerning local government in country X depends on the national government and the Parliament.

Excluding the capital, the country is subdivided into regions with no statutory bodies to execute any responsibilities. Below the regional level, the country has the local council tier, responsible for services such as education, waste management and strategic planning. Local councils have an executive system and the area covered by them is divided into one or more electoral divisions. They are elected every four years.

Local councils are funded by a combination of central government grants, a locally-set tax based on house values, property taxes, and fees and charges for certain services. Many of these funds can only be spent in a specific way. Particularly important in the frame of this case is the Schools Grant, which funds schools that are managed by the local council. These are mostly state-funded primary schools, since many publicly-funded secondary schools are directly funded by the central government. The food program is channeled through the local councils' Schools Grants.

Left-wing local councils

These are local councils that have a majority of elected representatives from the left-wing party.

Especially following the implementation of austerity measures to tackle the 2008/09 financial crisis, local councils have suffered severe spending cuts.

Local councils are considered local entities (institutions and bodies belonging to the local government system in country X). This local governance system comprises a distribution of functions that varies across the territory depending on local arrangements. Except for the country's capital, where there is some devolution of power, legislation concerning local government in country X depends on the national government and the Parliament.

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Right-wing party

Ideologically conservative. Current ruling party. It has a majority in Parliament.

Given its political majority, right-wing legislators have a key role when there are initiatives for passing new laws and for enabling the government to raise taxes. Just like the other Members of Parliament (MPs), each right-wing MP represents a constituency. They support the current national government.

Left-wing party

A social-democrat party, the second largest party in Parliament after the right-wing one. The official opposition party.

In this case, the left-wing party is in a minority; therefore, it does not have enough power to pass new laws. The left-wing party supports ideas of redistribution of wealth through taxation and a larger welfare state, including publicly funded healthcare.

The opposition party in Parliament has a key role in overseeing and controlling the work of the national government. It may contribute to the creation of policy and legislation through constructive criticism. In addition, the opposition party opposes government proposals it disagrees with and puts forward its own policies in order to improve its chances of winning the next general election.

Right-wing populist party

This political party's number of seats in Parliament puts it in the minority.

Far right political party, its xenophobic views against immigration and far right stances have kept it isolated from other parties. It has not formed any government coalitions. Currently without the power to lead any legislative initiative. However, it has had the capacity to have an impact on public discourse.

Public figure

He is key in supporting a U-turn on the Prime Minister's decision on the free meals policy.

He is a very well-known footballer and a very popular person in country X, and has strong, long-standing ties with social rights associations and charity work. During his childhood, he saw his family struggling with poverty and economic insecurity; he is therefore very sensitive to poverty issues.

Social rights association

In favor of the extension of the food program.

This is a network of social rights associations from all over the country. They have been at the forefront of combatting the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and have already pressured the national government to extend the food program over the summer holidays.

The network was able to gather together dignitaries and celebrity figures to speak in favor of their demands regarding the extension of the food program into the summer holidays.

Socially-responsible food firms

These are businesses that are interested in tackling the food problem.

Restaurants, food shops, and grocery chains that have reinforced their public image through contributions to food banks since the poverty problem was exacerbated after the 2008/09 crisis.

Lately, since the summer holiday extension of the food program was denied, they have built up a

network of businesses to collect community support and offer free meals to children who qualify.

Food companies' association

This is an association representing the food and drink sector.

The foundation acts on the business-critical issues of the day on behalf of its members, and it also has core activities dealing with social responsibility.

The organization works with the government, regulators, consumers and the media.

Left-wing media

Media outlets supporting the social movement for free school meals and critical of the current national government.

"Media outlets" refers to country X's main local/national means of mass communication (broadcasting, publishing and the Internet).

The media has the power to inform and mobilize citizens. Although the media outlets in the country are varied and their number is very large, most of them are controlled by 15 large groups. They can be divided into those that have historically been aligned with more conservative positions and political parties, and the ones that are aligned with more left-wing parties and positions.

Right-wing media

These are media outlets that support the national government's stance regarding the responsibility of families to provide food for their children.

"Media outlets" refers to country X's main local/national means of mass communication (broadcasting, publishing and the Internet).

The media has the power to inform and mobilize citizens. Although the media outlets in the country are varied and their number is very large, most of them are controlled by 15 large groups. They can be divided into those that have historically been aligned with more conservative positions and political parties, and the ones that are aligned with more left-wing parties and positions.

Strategy 1 – Parliamentary motion

The Prime Minister’s declaration and the national government’s refusal to extend the food program over the summer holidays for over 1.4 million children is highly controversial, and provokes a spirited response among citizenship and civil society actors. The public figure meets with all the political parties with representation in Parliament in order to gather support to pass an Opposition Motion. The motion entails an opposition party forcing a vote in Parliament on plans to extend free school meals over the school holidays.

The public figure aims to change the internal consensus in the right-wing parliamentary vote (which is already cracking over the school meals issue). In this regard, he urges the leading opposition party to mobilize, but also tries to gather some votes both from conservative MPs and also from others who belong to smaller opposition parties in Parliament.

Will the parliamentary motion to extend free school meals over the school summer holidays succeed and be passed?

A. Who will **oppose the parliamentary motion** to extend free school meals over the school holidays led by the left-wing party?

B. Who will **support the parliamentary motion** to extend free school meals over the school holidays led by the left-wing party?

[Select those actors that you think will oppose the initiative and those who will support it.]

[Go to Appendix A on page 12 to see the list of actors supporting and opposing the parliamentary motion, as well as the distribution of resources between supporters and opponents.]

[Once you have correctly selected the actors as opponents or supporters of the parliamentary motion, go to page 9.]

The balance of political resources is negative for the public figure (-50). This strategy fails, as the parliamentary motion does not garner majority support in Parliament. Once it has been decided that the food program will not be extended after the summer holidays, the national government backs the Prime Minister's declaration by arguing in favor of the responsibility of local councils and families to also make an effort in these difficult times. This position is also the one underpinning the ruling party's position on the motion in Parliament. Thus, with its majority of seats, it votes down the opposition motion, which is therefore rejected.

For this strategy to be successful, the public figure knew that he needed the support of some right-wing parliamentary representatives to pass the motion. However, ever since the Prime Minister's took the decision to not extend the free meal program to the following school holidays, some media and social media actors have been echoing the displeasure of many citizens and civil society representatives. Hence, the debate being raised in Parliament has highlighted the generalized dissatisfaction with the national government's response to the food crisis fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic. But for the public figure, the politicization of the motion has not played in favor of the free meals extension.

The strategy has benefited social rights associations and the left-wing party since, on the one hand, it has raised the public perception that the national government is insensitive to people's hardships and is not handling the COVID-19 pandemic crisis appropriately. On the other hand, it has also laid bare internal breaches among members of the cabinet, right-wing party members and local councils in historically right-wing constituencies. Moreover, the debate has increased the feeling that local councils have been abandoned by the national government. At the forefront of the government response to the pandemic, ideologically different local entities have expressed that the demand for help has outstripped the national government's allocation of economic resources. This means they do not have the resources to extend funding for free school meals unless the national government increases its commitment. Some right-wing parliamentary members and government officials have leaked information to the media expressing their opposition to the Prime Minister's decision.

Strategy 2 – Petitioning parliament based on a national civil society advocacy campaign

Bolstered by the support he receives on Twitter and the encouragement of the coordination platform that brings together charities and food businesses, the public figure launches a campaign to collect signatures for a petition to Parliament. A petition is a mechanism by which citizens and residents of country X can raise issues to be discussed by the national government and Parliament. When a petition reaches 10,000 signatures on the government and Parliament website, the government is required to reply to it. If it reaches 100,000 signatures the petition must be considered for a debate in Parliament.

The petition's aims are to pressure the national government to allocate money to: i) expand free school meals to all under-16s who have a parent or guardian receiving a social benefit; ii) provide meals during all school holidays.

The success of the campaign depends on the extent to which it is able to reach and mobilize a wide range of people and social, cultural and economic groups beyond the left-wing party.

Will the petition make the national government change its current position and extend free school meals to all under-16s?

A. Who will oppose the campaign to collect signatures for a petition to Parliament?

B. Who will support the campaign to collect signatures for a petition to Parliament?

[Select those actors that you think will oppose the initiative and those who will support it.]

[Go to Appendix B on page 13 to see the list of actors supporting and opposing the parliamentary motion, as well as the distribution of resources between supporters and opponents.]

[Once you have correctly selected the actors as opponents or supporters of the parliamentary motion, go to page 11.]

This strategy succeeds. The balance of political resources is positive (+300). The petition finally reaches over 1 million signatures, and becomes one of only five parliamentary petitions since the mechanism was put in place to attract over 1 million supporters. The national government is forced to debate it in Parliament. As a consequence of the success of the petition and its public dimension, the pressure causes cracks in the cabinet, as the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education blame each other over who is responsible for denying more funding to local councils. The left-wing party piles on the pressure declaring that “it is unbelievable that this government would refuse to provide food to the country’s poorest children at the height of a pandemic”. There is a U-turn in the policy. However, only one of the two demands is met. Thus, while the food program extension to provide meals after the summer holidays is approved, the free school meals policy is not expanded to all under-16s who have a parent or guardian receiving a social benefit.

Learning objectives

The initiative shows the amount of pressure that community mobilization can put on policy-makers. By departing from partisan politics and targeting crosscutting problems, the petition is able to garner support from a very diverse range of social and political actors.

Appendix

A) Distribution of actors – Strategy 1

Actors opposing the parliamentary motion (resources in parenthesis):

- The national government (political: 150; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 150)
- Right-wing party (political: 150; economic: 0; knowledge:0; legal: 0)
- Right-wing populist party (political: 20; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 10)
- Right-wing local councils (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Right-wing media (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)

Actors supporting the parliamentary motion (resources in parenthesis):

- Public figure (political: 100; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Left-wing party (political: 100; economic: 0; knowledge:0; legal: 100)
- Left-wing local councils (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 150)
- Left-wing media (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Social right association (political: 70; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)

Inactive actors:

- Food companies' association
- Socially-responsible food firms

Note about resources.

Political resources refer to the amount of consensus an actor is able to achieve. Economic resources refer to the ability to mobilise money or any form of wealth in order to modify other actors' behaviour. Knowledge is the availability of important information for the decisional process. Finally, legal resources refer to the advantages or disadvantages attributed to particular actors by legal norms and legislative and administrative authority's decisions. Political resources are the most crucial for the public figure to promote his initiative.

B) Distribution of actors – Strategy 2

Actors opposing the campaign (resources in parenthesis):

- The national government (political: 120; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 120)
- Right-wing party (political: 100; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)

Actors supporting the campaign (resources in parenthesis):

- Public figure (political: 150; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Left-wing party (political: 90; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 90)
- Left-wing local councils (political: 40; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 120)
- Social rights association (political: 100; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Socially-responsible food firms (political: 40; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Left-wing media (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)
- Right-wing media (political: 50; economic: 0; knowledge: 0; legal: 0)

Inactive actors:

- Food companies' association
- Right-wing populist party
- Right-wing local councils

Note about resources.

Political resources refer to the amount of consensus an actor is able to achieve. Economic resources refer to the ability to mobilise money or any form of wealth in order to modify other actors' behaviour. Knowledge is the availability of important information for the decisional process. Finally, legal resources refer to the advantages or disadvantages attributed to particular actors by legal norms and legislative and administrative authority's decisions. Political resources are the most crucial for the public figure to promote his initiative.

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Case studies available

- El cas Pirelli-Mar. (Ref. CL-2022-01)
- Instituto Mental de Santa Cruz. (Ref. PA-2022-01)
- School meals for vulnerable children. (Ref. PCUBE-2022-01)
- Artificial Intelligence and automated decision making in welfare policies. (Ref. PCUBE-2022-02)

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