

# The *Desayunos Escolares* programme as a public food policy in Mexico

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School feeding programmes are multifaceted schemes that make it possible to break the cycle of hunger and poverty, contributing to better learning and boosting social, economic and cultural development, especially when linked with other social rights programmes.

## 1 The framework and operation of the *Desayunos Escolares* programme

School feeding in Mexico began in 1929, with a programme that provided milk to schools in Mexico City. The *Gota de Leche* programme went through several reformulations regarding the food provided and the target population, which led to an increase in the number of school enrolments and contributed to the permanence of children in schools (Romero et al 2010). Unlike what happens today, in the 1980s the programme was universal in Mexico City, distributing meals to all children.

Up to 1994, the programme operated in a standardised way at the national level, ignoring differences between the country's various regions. However, it has since been institutionalised through the 'National System for the Integral Development of the Family' (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*—SNDIF), with representation in each state and several municipalities, and food started being purchased and distributed by local actors. After its latest overhaul in the 1990s, the programme was renamed to 'School Breakfasts' (*Programa Desayunos Escolares*—PDE) (ibid.).

According to a report prepared by the World Food Programme (WFP) and SNDIF (2014), as the PDE<sup>1</sup> is not based on studies that show regional differences in the living conditions of populations, ends up including children who do not need this assistance, while failing to serve the programme's intended audience.

Public policies in Mexico are tailored to the autonomy of the states, changing according to local conditions. For example, children up to five years old are prioritised in some locations, while those up to twelve years old are prioritised in others—the average age when children conclude elementary school. The origin of the food provided also varies; it can range from minimally processed food or food processed and supplied by some industry—the so-called 'Cold Breakfast' (*Desayuno Frío*), to food fully prepared in schools, with ingredients supplied by companies or even by local producers—known as 'Warm Breakfast' (*Desayuno Caliente*). Currently, *Desayuno Frío* makes up most of the food provided by the programme. The justification for its predominance is that it does not require schools to have kitchen and cafeteria logistics to be contemplated by the programme.

One of the programme's conditions is that parents visit their children's schools—on average, five times a month—to help with cooking and storing food or distributing it, depending on the type of programme carried out at that particular location. These conditions prevent children from receiving food when their mothers cannot participate.

Another condition is that families must contribute with a payment known as 'recovery fee' (*cuota de recuperación*), which ranges between MXN0.50 to MXN5 per day, according to the meal modality (*frío* or *caliente*) and what has been established by the government and local schools. This amount is usually returned to the state government, to be reinvested in the PDE, but there is no standard procedure for using this resource: it varies across states.

Although school feeding programmes have existed in Mexico for several decades, poverty rates have remained practically the same in recent years, with 45 per cent of the country's population living in poverty.<sup>2</sup> This fact is closely linked to the Mexican government's position of considering poverty as a phenomenon resulting from factors that are beyond the individual's control, while at the same time blaming the individual for their own misfortunes in the formulation of public food policy (Fuentes and Aramburu 2017), instead of making these policies a means of guaranteeing the human right to adequate food.

The fight against such situations must be conducted through structured public policies, bearing in mind that, ideally, significant improvement in the country's food security should derive from better jobs, in the resulting reduction of household poverty, and in a joint effort between local, state, and federal authorities across the health care, social and economic development sectors of the country.

Thus, school feeding public policy must be integrated with other public social policies, with a special focus on strengthening family and peasant farming and its integration with local markets.

Although there are 6,489 social public policies currently in place in Mexico across the federal, state and municipal levels, they are not harmonious between them, sometimes overlapping in certain areas and leaving other social problems unattended, causing what is called 'policy duplication' (Lugo and Michel 2018). Thus, public policies tend to address only specific needs without fully guaranteeing the basic rights of the population. Although the Mexican government has, at times, tried to articulate social policies among themselves, they have remained scattered since potential interconnections are not foreseen in their conception and formulation. This can be proven by the fact that the number of citizens enrolled in food programmes is greater than the number of people suffering from food poverty in the country, without a significant reduction in food and nutrition insecurity. In other words, there are flaws in the design of food policies that result in middle-income people joining the programme, while low-income people remain uncovered (Romero et al. 2010). According to Salazar and Godoy (2018), the lack of coordination between public policies at the intersectoral level and between the different levels of decision-making generally leads to failure<sup>3</sup>. On this issue, Salazar and Godoy (2018, 127) state that: "... in Mexico, the inconsistencies and limitations of social assistance policies and programmes to achieve so-called food security have been associated to the failure of an economic development model that considers indirect subsidies and economic transfers towards the most unprotected groups as a threat to market balance and competition. Lack of coordination at the local and national levels, centralised approaches, and erroneous definitions in the treatment of the food problem have led to unreliable diagnoses and unacceptable results."

School feeding also ranks among the public policies which lack harmony with other programmes and policies in related areas, without fully guaranteeing students the right to food. It is also marked by a disconnect between the agricultural sector and the educational sphere, as in other Latin American countries, such as Cuba, Bolivia, Haiti and Brazil (WFP 2017). Of crucial importance is political interaction between civil society organisations, government and other relevant actors, which could foster a new design of policies, programmes and institutional arrangements, in addition to improving the intersectoral integration of food and nutrition policies.

Although linking the production of small local farmers with school feeding programmes is considered an essential alternative for a healthy eating pattern, this is not what is observed in the case of the PDE, with few exceptions. Such an arrangement would provide stable demand for family farmers, opening sustainable local markets, allowing for meals with high nutritional value (fruits, vegetables, legumes, and animal products), nutrition education, improvement in school performance and increasing the employability and income rates of students. It would thus be possible to break the cycle of poverty and open new perspectives for the coming generations, since studies have shown that the higher the educational level of mothers, the greater the variety of food consumed by their children (Vega-Macedo et al. 2014).

There is also a general lack of programme evaluations at the national level. Such evaluations could be used to plan changes to better adapt the programme to the needs of the target audience. On the one hand, considering limited resources, there must be clear inclusion criteria. On the other hand, there is difficulty in targeting the programme more narrowly: directing it exclusively at some students of a particular school (Romero et al, 2010)<sup>4</sup>, and thus denying the Human Right to Adequate Food to those who do not receive the meal.

## 2 The PDE budget

There is no PDE-specific budget. The programme is included in a public budget called 'General Branch 33' (*Ramo General 33*), destined to all food social assistance programmes. This leaves the target audience of this policy in a vulnerable situation, as they largely depend on the government's good will. Its management at the national level is guided by the 'Guidelines for the Comprehensive Social Food Assistance Strategy' (*Lineamientos de la Estrategia Integral de Asistencia Social Alimentaria—EIASA*), formulated by the SNDIF, which have a recommendatory character, since each state is free to formulate its own operating rules for the programme. Therefore, there is no mechanism that requires states to carry out the policy in a certain way, or to allocate a specific budget to the programme (ibid.), which causes the budget and operating rules to vary according from state to state. This dynamic results in the PDE—which defines itself as a national programme—yielding an enormous variety of programmes in the states and municipalities where it is executed (Núñez et al. 2008).

According to *Investigación en Salud y Demografía* (2018, 31): "It is important to note that, under the scheme of fiscal federalism and the objectives of *Ramo 33*, the operational and administrative coordination of the fund's resources are strictly in the hands of the 'State Systems for the Integral Development of the Family' (*Sistemas Estatales de Desarrollo Integral de la Familia—SEDIF*). **In other words, although the EIASA is a frame of reference, SEDIF has decision-making powers regarding the allocation and administration of resources.**"

Thus, it is difficult to guarantee the human right to adequate food in food programmes, due to the autonomy of the states in deciding how to manage resources, leaving *Ramo 33* at the mercy of public administration, as it takes on the guise of a government—rather than State—policy. Also according to the same source, and seeking to improve the management of *Ramo 33*, "... it would be necessary to develop guidelines to clearly establish how the resources should be allocated, that is, how they should be distributed among the four EIASA programmes" (p. 42). Thus, ensuring the share of the FAM-AS that would go to the PDE. Of the total *Ramo 33* budget allocated to each state, the federation determines that 2 per cent is distributed according to the DIF Performance Index<sup>5</sup> of each state in relation to the development of programmes and implementation of EIASA, while 98 per cent is distributed according to the 'Social Vulnerability Index' (*Indice de Vulnerabilidad Social—IVS*), which highlights the vulnerabilities of each state.

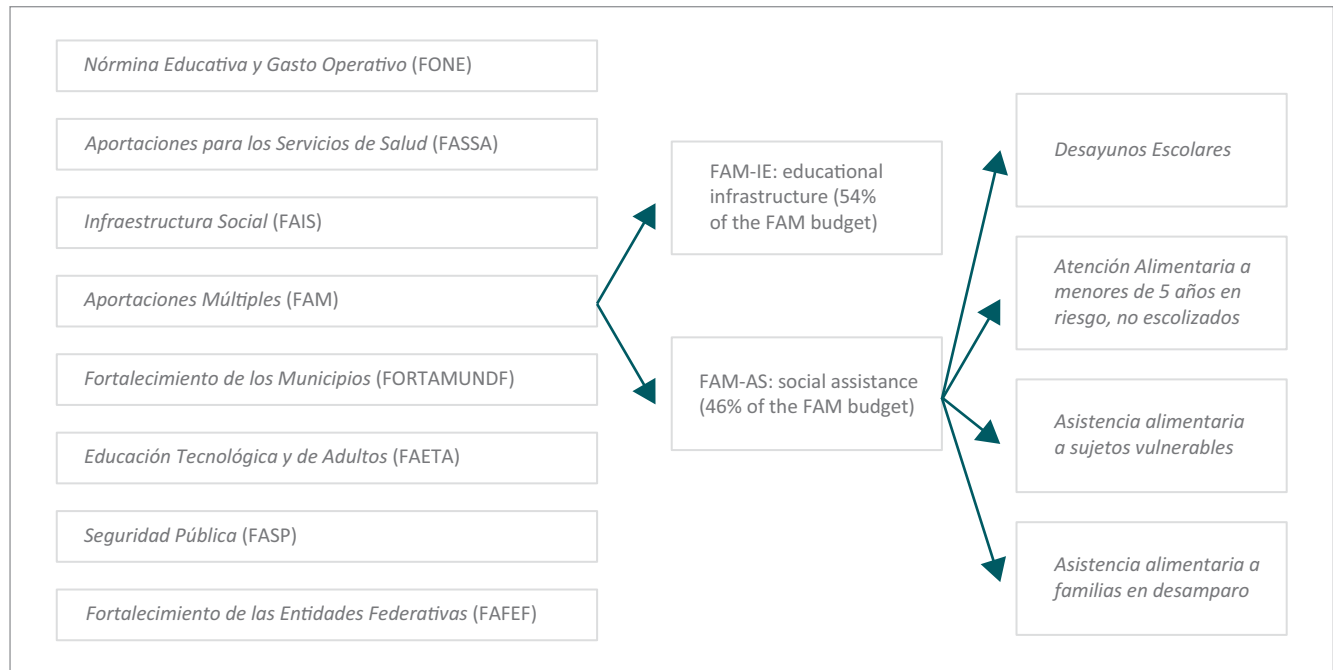
The so-called "*Ramo General 33: Aportaciones Federales para Entidades Federativas y Municipios*" was created as part of the reform of the 'Fiscal Coordination Law' (*Ley de Coordinación*

*Fiscal*), at the heart of the decentralisation and fiscal federalism implemented in Mexico, when the government sought to bring public policies closer to their rightful audience. Within *Ramo 33* there are eight funds<sup>6</sup>, which aim to address issues of health, education, basic and educational infrastructure, public safety, and food and social assistance programmes. Among these is the 'Multiple Contribution Fund' (*Fondo*

*de Aportaciones Múltiples*—FAM), which comprises the educational infrastructure (FAM-IE) and social assistance (FAM-AS). The objective here is to give priority to FAM-AS, coordinated by the Department of Health (*Secretaría de Salud*), to which the SNDIF answers, and which controls the fund in accordance with the Social Assistance Law, specifically in the context of food social assistance (*ibid.*).

**FIGURE 1**

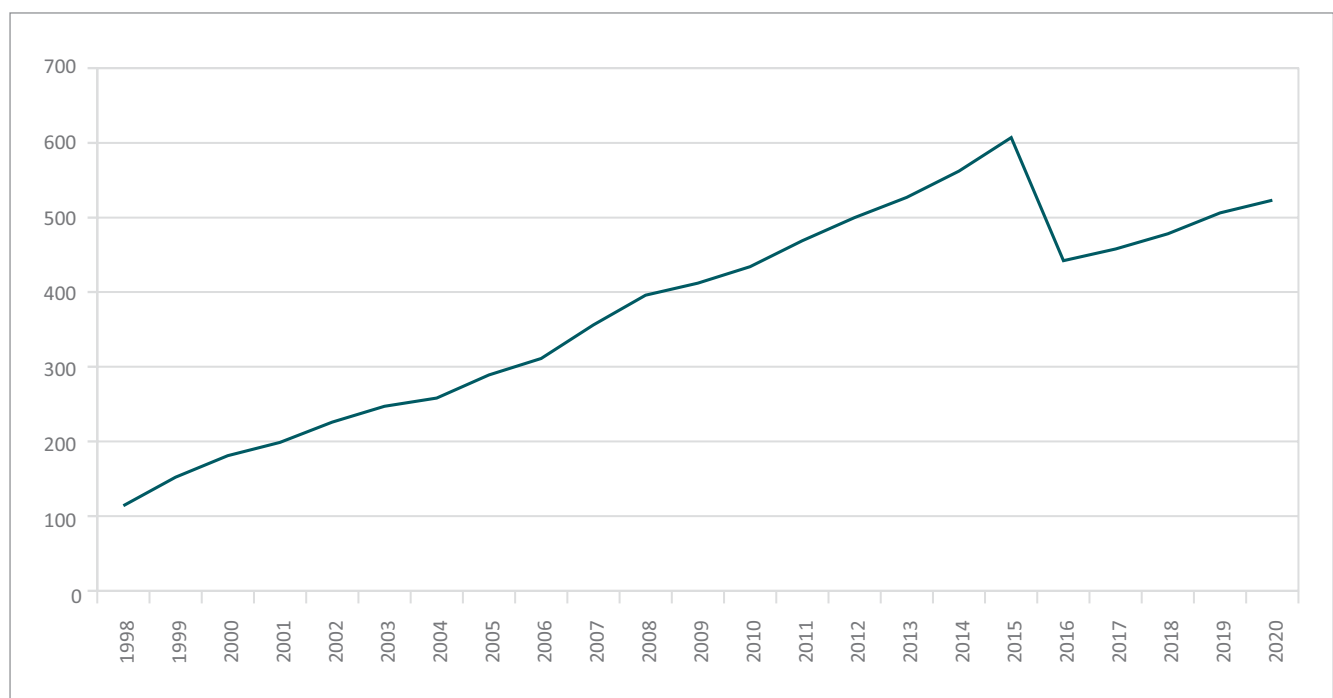
Budget chart of the *Ramo General 33: Aportaciones Federales Para Entidades Federativas Y Municipios*



Source: Author's elaboration.

**FIGURE 2**

National budget for *Ramo 33* for all Mexican states, MEX billions (1998 to 2020)



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from *Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*.

Under the SNDIF, each state's DIFs operates in accordance with the EIASA, which regulates the following programmes: 1) *Desayunos escolares*; 2) 'Food care for at-risk children under five years old' (*Atención alimentaria a menores de cinco años en riesgo, no escolarizados*); 3) 'Food assistance to vulnerable persons' (*Asistencia alimentaria a sujetos vulnerables*); and 4) 'Food assistance to families in distress' (*Asistencia alimentaria a familias en desamparo*). The division of resources within FAM allocates 54 per cent to the FAM-IE, to be used for construction, equipment, and reforms of the physical infrastructure of the basic, secondary, and tertiary education levels, and 46 per cent to the FAM-AS, used in the PDE, food support and social assistance programmes, through public institutions (*ibid.*).

Núñez et al. (2008, 4) state that: "Given the scheme in which the budget for Fund V, Branch 33 is presented, it is difficult to establish substantive differences between what is done across the different programmes integrated by the EIASA, since the budget is not assigned or labelled for each; nevertheless, it is evident that expenditures on school breakfasts are much higher than in any of the programmes that are not even mandatory at the national level."

Figure 1 was devised to provide a better understanding of the budget division of *Ramo 33*. It contains an organisational chart, the divisions of the FAM and the divisions of the FAM-AS, up to the PDE.

Note that the connection between *Ramo 33* and the FAM at the national level is ad-hoc and not representative. Between 2008 and 2015, the FAM budget allocated, on average, only 3 per cent of the total budget for *Ramo 33*. In 2017 this scenario was even worse, when only 1.7 per cent of the budget for *Ramo 33* was allocated to the FAM<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 2 was drawn to depict the situation of *Ramo 33*, according to data from the Department of Finance and Public Credit (*Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público*). It shows the growth curve of the budget made available to all states in Mexico from 1998 to 2020<sup>8</sup>. This time frame was chosen because *Ramo 33* was created in 1997.

Despite the increased budget, a more in-depth interpretation it would be necessary to identify the growth of this budget together with the growth in the number of students enrolled in the programme, which is not the objective of this brief.

According to Núñez et al (2008), the cost of meals tends to vary significantly between states, "in the case of *desayunos fríos*, they cost between MEX1.52 for the state of Durango up to MEX57.8 in the case of Coahuila; the cost of *desayunos calientes* ranges from MEX1.83 in Durango to MEX237.19 for Tabasco" (Núñez et al. 2008, 81). "The main problem arises from the lack of national regulations that require the SEDIF to make use the resources of *Ramo 33* efficiently" (*ibid.*, 58). In a more recent assessment of *Ramo 33*, *Investigación en Salud y Demografía* (2018) confirmed that there is not enough incentives or enforcement mechanisms to make states comply with established rules: "Given that 98 percent of the resources received by the states are assigned based on the IVS, it is possible that the fund's incentive system works in an inverse manner; that is, that the states do not follow the EIASA provisions and continue to receive at least the same amount of resources as in previous years" (*ibid.*, 59).

Thus, there are no political or administrative mechanisms to enforce the states to follow the rules for the supply and reporting of data, and the SNDIF does not have a mandate to force each state's DIFs to comply with official formats and deliver them in a timely manner, making it even more difficult to evaluate the programme at the national level.

The analysis showed that food problems in Mexico are related to the lack of integration of public policies, and the failure to guarantee the human right to adequate food through existing policies (as in the PDE's case). Therefore, we recommend the integration of these policies into a system that can guarantee rights, guided by a legal framework that might ensure the proper functioning of the PDE, a fully transparent system of accountability that lends legitimacy to public expenditures, and a dialog mechanism between the various national, state and municipal institutions.

In addition, social participation—especially from rights-holders and civil society in general—in political decisions is important according to the specificities of the country's various regions. In the PDE's case specifically, it is extremely important to ensure that the foods offered have high nutritional value and that they are in accordance with local eating habits, ensuring food sovereignty. In this sense, discussions related to short food supply chains can be extremely fruitful in fostering purchases from local agriculture, promoting a revitalisation of the local economy and careful consideration for each region's eating habits.

1. Mexico has two school feeding programmes: 1) Full-Time Schools (*Escuelas de Tiempo Completo*), which comprise around 6.5 per cent of schools and which fall under the purview of the Department of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública—SEP*), and; 2) the PDE, which is active in 35 per cent of schools, and which falls under the purview of the SNDIF (2019).

2. For more information, see: <<https://thp.org.mx/mas-informacion/datos-de-hambre-y-pobreza/>> (in Spanish).

3. When analysing these problems, Fuentes and Aramburu (2017, 15) posit that: "One of the main challenges of [the] programmes has to do with the definition and quantification of the target population [ . . . ]. There is a large variety of disjointed programmes, insufficient coordination within and between institutions in charge, as well as insufficient coordination between the federal, state and municipal levels in matters of social development" (freely translated by the author).

4. Regardless, similar initiatives are recurrent in Mexico City, whereby some students in a given class receive the food benefit and others who do not can only watch their classmates consume their meals.

5. For more information on how the Performance Index works, see: <<http://sitios.dif.gob.mx/alimentacion/docs/Indice%20de%20Desempeno%202019.pdf>> (in Spanish).

6. *Infraestructura Social (FAIS)*; *Fortalecimiento de los Municipios (FORTAMUNDF)*; *Aportaciones Múltiples (FAM)*; *Educación Tecnológica y de Adultos (FAETA)*; *Seguridad Pública (FASP)*; *Fortalecimiento de las Entidades Federativas (FAFEF)*; *Nómina Educativa y Gasto Operativo (FONE)*; and *Aportaciones para los Servicios de Salud (FASSA)*.

7. In its Result Reports, the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (*Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social—CONEVAL*) publishes evaluations of the *Ramo General 33* with the percentages mentioned. For more information, see: <[https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/Documents/Evaluaciones\\_Ramo\\_33/Informes/Informe\\_Resultados\\_R33\\_14\\_15.pdf](https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/Documents/Evaluaciones_Ramo_33/Informes/Informe_Resultados_R33_14_15.pdf)> and <[https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/Documents/Evaluaciones\\_Ramo\\_33/Informes/Informe\\_Resultados\\_R33\\_15\\_17.pdf](https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/Documents/Evaluaciones_Ramo_33/Informes/Informe_Resultados_R33_15_17.pdf)>.

8. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons behind the decrease in the budget for *Ramo 33* in 2016, since this amount represents the budget of several programmes, and a decrease in this larger budget does not necessarily imply a decrease in the PDE budget. Furthermore, it is known that, in that year, Mexico underwent a fiscal reform, which may have influenced the distribution of resources.

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*The views expressed in this brief are the authors' and not necessarily those of the Government of Brazil or the United Nations Development Programme.*

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