A kitchen in the community

can we localise school meals in Ireland to benefit health, environment, and livelihoods?

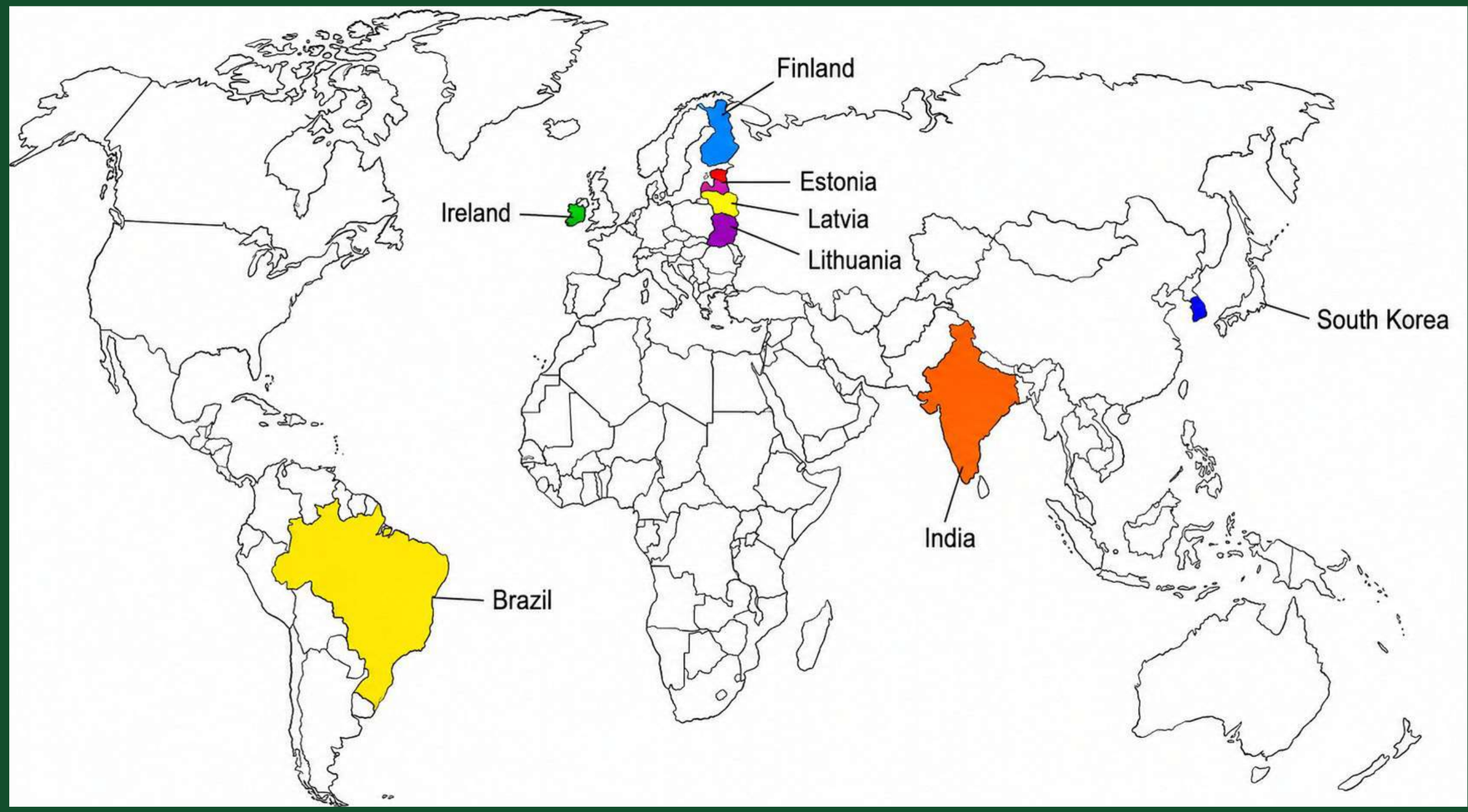
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Ruth Hegarty

Director, Food Policy Ireland

Corenet, 21 Sept 2026

Ireland is one of only a few countries in the world with a universal free school meals programme



Free hot meal to all Primary School children (5-12yrs), commitment to extend to Secondary level

How does our school meal programme work?

New Programme

€3.20 per meal funded by

Department of Social Protection

Total annual Govt budget

allocation approx €325 million

School must tender for School Meal

Provider

550,000 primary school children are

eligible for hot school meals.

c. 3.4 million meals weekly

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Specific Challenges in Irish Context

Historically, children in Ireland bring a packed lunch to school

Most schools do not have kitchens or canteens

The school day is short

We don’t have the equivalent of municipalities

National programme

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a siloed policy

School Meals Scheme

1 Department

1 Dimension

1 Goal



Feeding every child

- a logistical problem to be solved

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The Result

Outsourced school meals

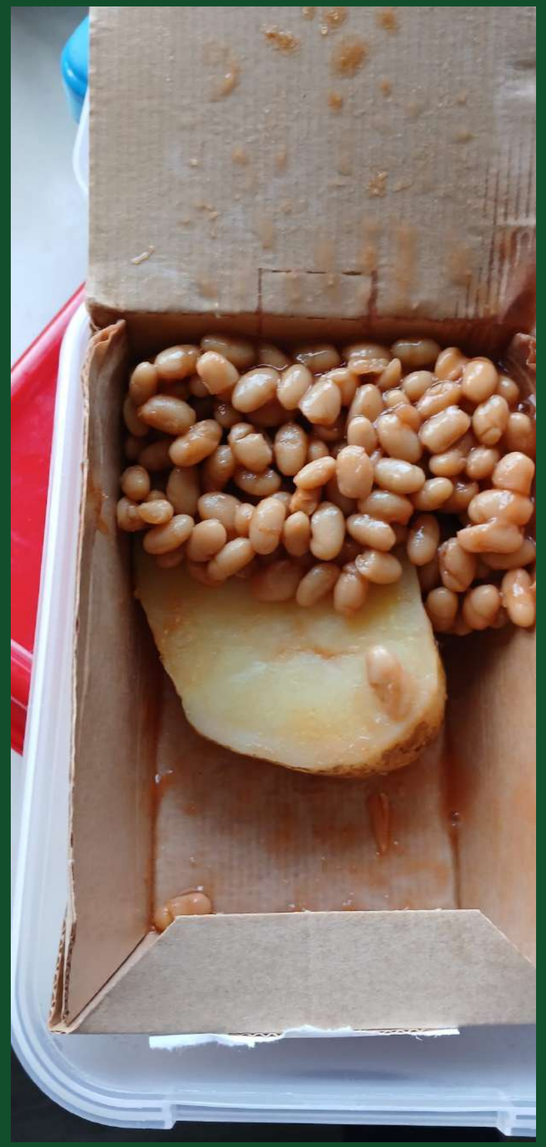
Market dominated by small number of large private for-profit suppliers

‘Assemble and reheat’ model of production

Long food supply chains

Poor nutrition

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Real examples of current Irish School Meals

What’s wrong with the existing model?

The Government Hot School Meals Scheme

HEALTH

Meal composition

Method of production

Menu Options & Choice





EDUCATION

No food education integration

Mixed messages

EQUITY

Add-ons

Children bringing own lunches



Home / Irish News

Profits soar to €5.7m at school meals provider Glanmore Foods

Firm employs over 230 people and is owned by global catering giant Compass



Glanmore Foods supply around 450 schools with meals. Photo: Getty

PROFIT MODEL

Aggressive marketing

Dominated by small number of large suppliers

OVERSIGHT & GOVERNANCE

Lack of transparency

How is money being spent

How are meals produced? Who is producing?



ENVIRONMENT

Waste - Food and packaging,

Lunches traveling huge distances

Lack of localised procurement

More than a meal

nourishing children, communities, and planet



Our Vision

- 👥 Social Equity
- 🥦 Healthy children, healthy futures
- 🚜 Stronger communities
- 🌱 Good for the planet
- 📚❤️ Learning to love food

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KEY CHANGES

Whole School Food Approach

Limited daily choice, changing menu cycles

In-school meal service

Procurement changes: SFSCs

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HOW TO GET THERE?
Locally-led Community and Cooperative Approaches

IRD DUHALLOW
COMMUNITY FOOD SERVICES





- Community Café
- Meals on Wheels
- 2 Secondary School Canteens
- Créche & Afterschool Catering
- Community event catering

Our Case Study: community food hub in Ireland

Embedded in the Community

Cooked from scratch

Short Food Supply Chains - connect to local farms

Trust & Resilience





Duhallow Hot School Meals

30 schools in their local community

Cooked from scratch in bakery and kitchen from 4am daily

Dispatched hot to schools by 12 noon

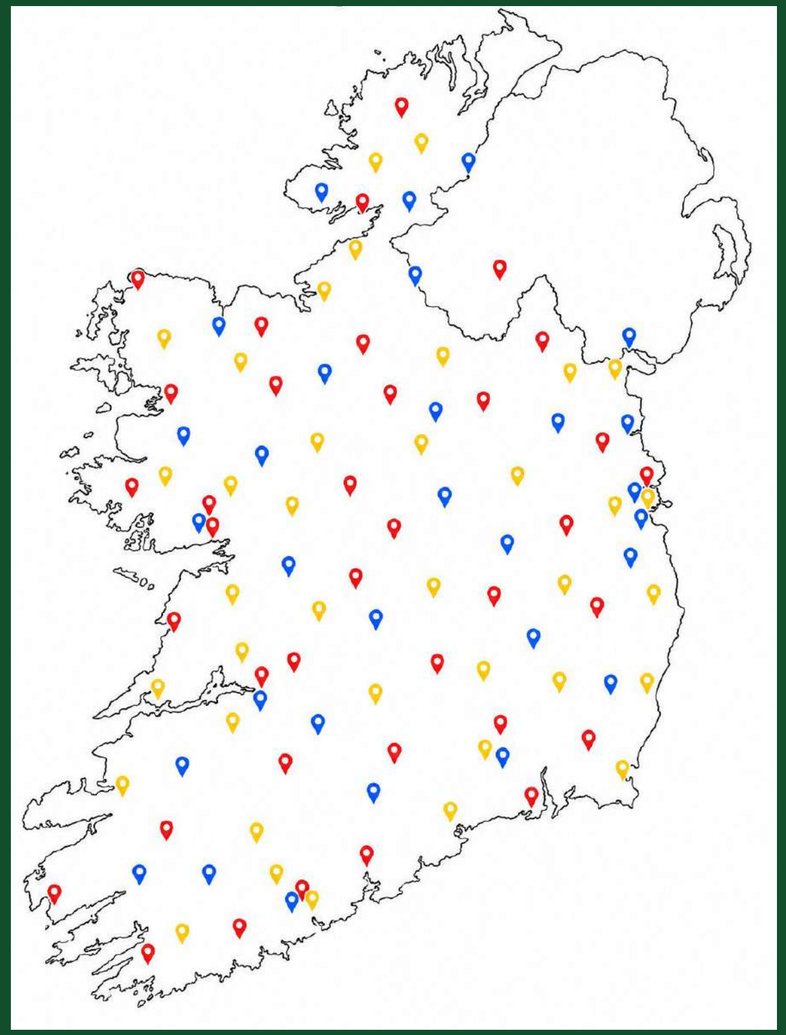
Local suppliers

Community employment - 75

Weekly engagement with parents - rotating menu

100 Community Food Hubs

A future where every school in Ireland has the infrastructure, and support to access good food locally — strengthening people, place, and planet.

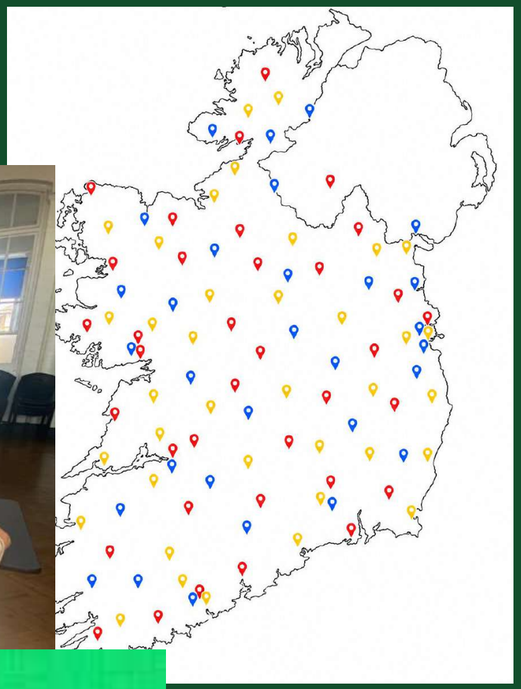


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Pathways

- Piloting the Community Food Hub Approach integrating best practice





- Capacity-building and training in the community sector

  ‘Chefs in Schools’ approach



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Thank you

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