A new pilot project is enhancing children’s nutrition and food security in India by bringing Smart Foods to schools through the Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF)—the world’s largest meal provider to the underprivileged, serving 1.7 million free mid-day meals to schoolchildren throughout India each day. While many organizations are introducing healthier school meals, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and APF are employing a detailed scientific approach with their millet-based mid-day meal program. The partners are designing recipes that are easy to cook and that children will enjoy, while maximizing nutrient absorption, measuring health benefits, and more.

Smart Foods like millets, sorghum, and legumes are being used to target specific nutrient needs of malnourished children. While ICRISAT is leading this analysis, the pilot is also being made possible with support from the State Government of Karnataka and advice from the National Institute of Nutrition. This partnership program comes at a time when food insecurity, malnutrition, obesity, diabetes, and iron deficiency anemia are high in India, impeding good health and livelihoods. According to a recent study in the Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research, 50 percent of adolescent girls in India were anemic. To combat this problem, ICRISAT promotes traditional, micronutrient-dense grains, like millet, which can introduce significantly more iron, zinc, calcium, fiber, and protein into Indian diets.

The new mid-day meal program will start by serving Smart Food-based meals each school day to 800 schoolchildren in two schools in peri-urban areas, targeting children 11-14 years old—ages of significant cognitive and physical development with high iron requirements, especially for girls.

In a nearby village of Kagalipura, Bhagya Lakshmi complains that her daughter, Shivani, has skipped mid-day meals at school in the past. She hopes that this program will change that. Read more