

A kitchen in the community

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

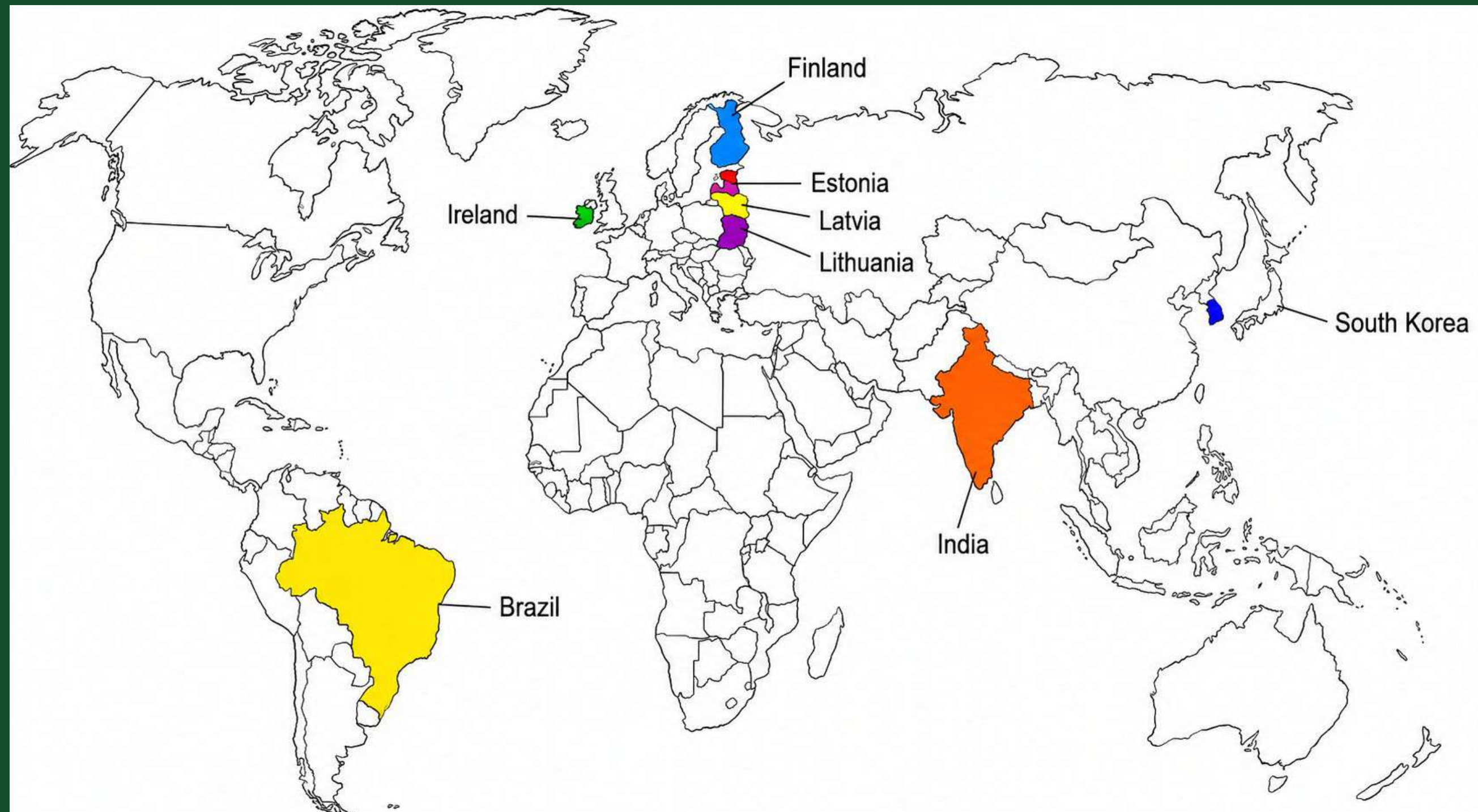
Ruth Hegarty

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

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

a siloed policy

School Meals Scheme

1 Department

1 Dimension

1 Goal

Dept of
Social Protection

Poverty

Feed Children

- Feeding every child
- a logistical problem to be solved

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





Real examples of current Irish School Meals

HEALTH

Meal composition
Method of production
Menu Options & Choice



EDUCATION

No food education integration
Mixed messages

EQUITY

Add-ons
Children bringing own lunches



What's wrong with the existing model?

The Government Hot School Meals Scheme

OVERSIGHT & GOVERNANCE

Lack of transparency
How is money being spent
How are meals produced? Who is producing?

PROFIT MODEL

Aggressive marketing
Dominated by small number of large suppliers



ENVIRONMENT

Waste - Food and packaging,
Lunches traveling huge distances
Lack of localised procurement

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

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

KEY CHANGES

Whole School Food Approach

Limited daily choice, changing
menu cycles

In-school meal service

Procurement changes: SFSCs



HOW TO GET THERE?

Locally-led Community and Cooperative Approaches



Community Café

Meals on Wheels

**2 Secondary School
Canteens**

**Crèche & 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



Duhallo 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

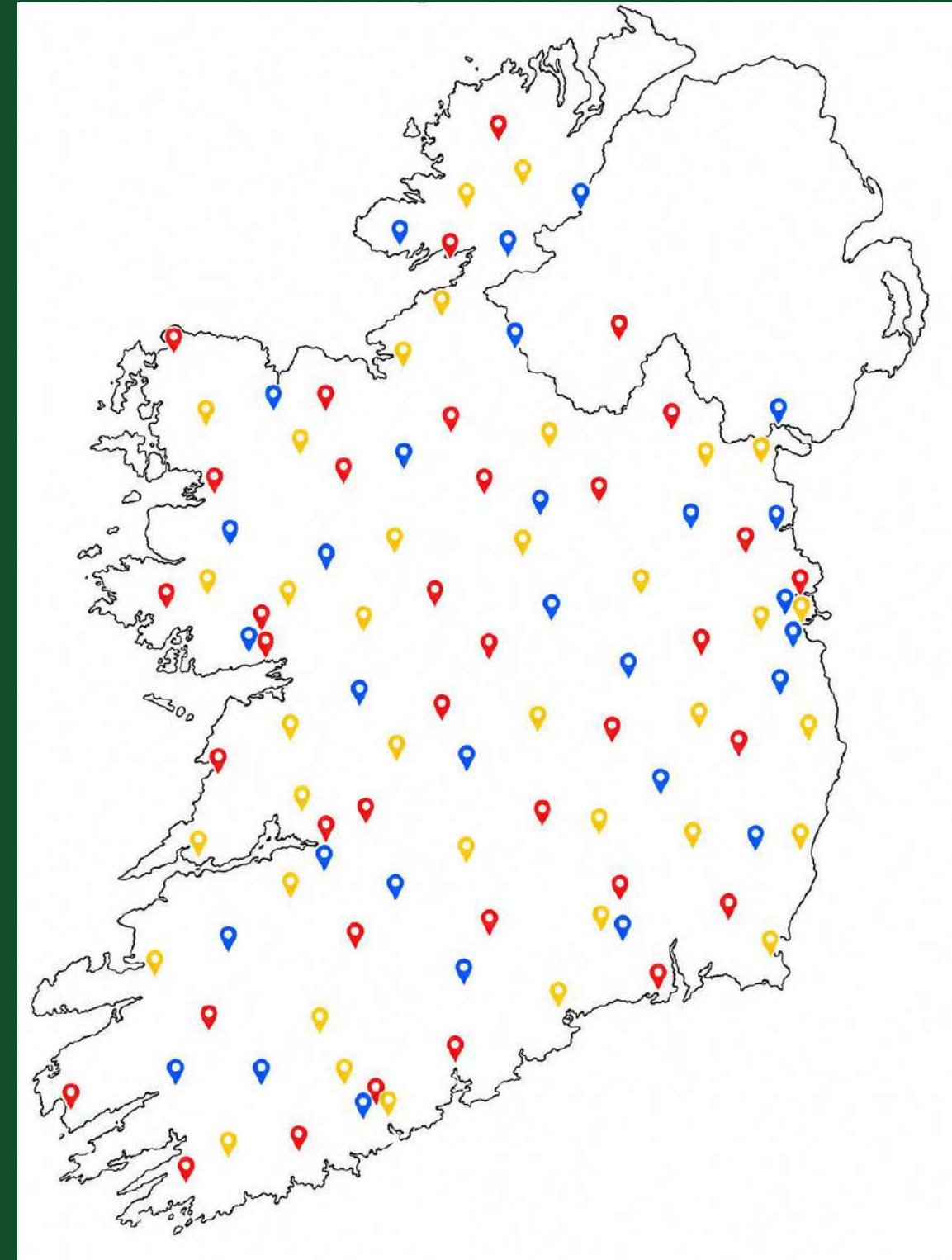
Local suppliers

Community employment -
75

Weekly engagement with
parents - rotating menu

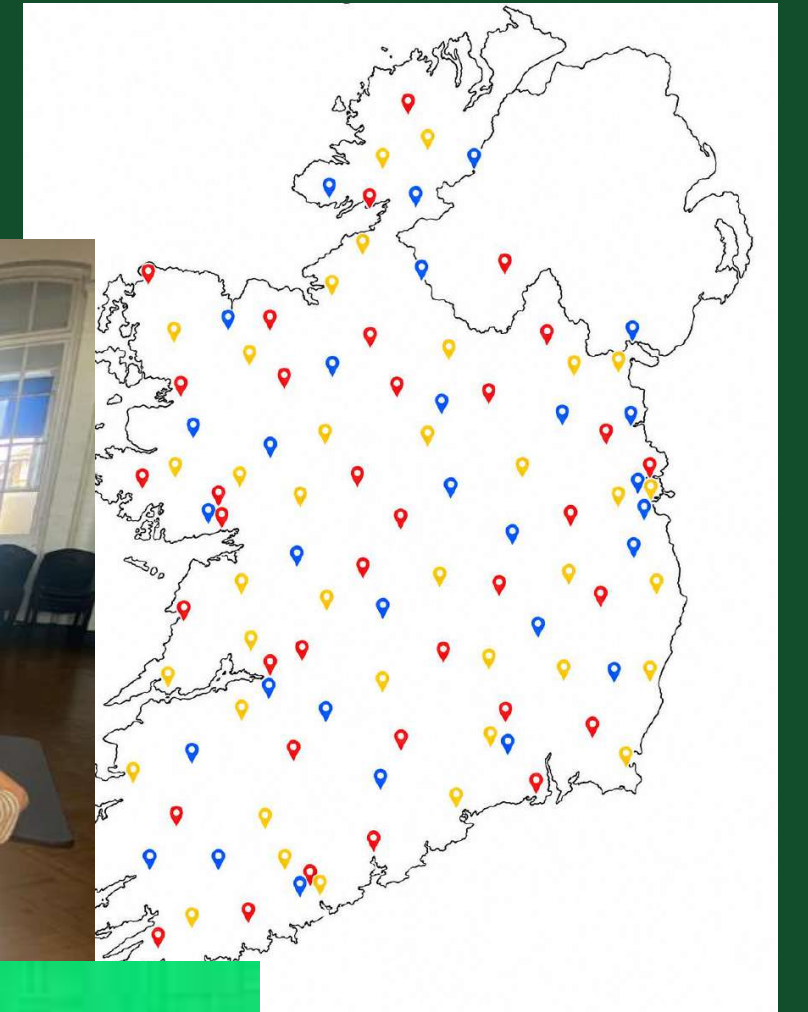
100 Community Food Hubs

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



Pathways

- **Piloting the Community Food Hub Approach integrating best practice**
- **Capacity-building and training in the community sector**
‘Chefs in Schools’ approach





Thank you