

# Is school feeding a distraction?

by Pamela Baxter

*While nobody would deny children the right to food, school-feeding programmes fail to address important underlying issues.*

**S**chool feeding alone does not address the issue of quality of education. It is not sound educational psychology to provide extrinsic motivation where the educational structure in itself does not provide sufficient intrinsic motivation to bring and keep children in school. This risks creating a generation expecting to be rewarded even for things that are done for their own benefit. It is also poor psychology to

establish a situation of dependency in communities for something that cannot be sustained. This does not build a society but diminishes it. Favouring one section of the population over another - as school-feeding programmes often do - sows the seeds of future conflict.

While school-feeding programmes are always presented as an adjunct to a school programme, they often

become the sole reason for school enrolment and attendance. Even if there are never delays in receiving the food, the components are freely available and recipients do not sell excess items (all common occurrences) there is still the essential educational problem: food alone will not bring children to school or keep them there. Only a viable effective education programme can do that.

Perhaps most importantly, an ideal school-feeding initiative requires

open communication and joint ownership. The problems of school feeding are usually those of implementation or inappropriate or partial solutions. Many of these could be overcome if the principles of inclusion and open communication and ownership were fully utilised in the planning stages. In reality, however, the implementation of a school-feeding programme depends heavily on those most often unable to assist:

Education ministries are often enfeebled in an early reconstruction and international organisations put great responsibility for supporting wet-feeding programmes onto communities - for water, fuel wood, additional food items (eg salt and spices) and cooking. These are often very scarce commodities and the opportunity cost of providing these to a large group rather than with the family can be very high. In addition, school personnel (teachers and administrators) are expected to oversee the process, monitor attendance records of recipients and submit reports, often to the detriment to their educational responsibilities.

We need to remember that:

- The logistics of wet food preparation and delivery - especially when there are a hundred children in a class - are complex; children waiting in long queues for a cup of porridge are not effectively using time in school.
- Weekly distribution of dry rations often leads to children only coming to school on the days that the rations are distributed.
- It is hard for teachers to keep accurate attendance records when buildings are inadequate, student numbers high and materials in short supply.

*Schoolfeeding,  
Cambodia*



- When teachers themselves want food rations it is difficult for them to deny learners who do not regularly attend.
- Giving out dry rations to girls often leads to harassment as male pupils query why girls are given preferential treatment.
- The perceived advantage of an increase in learning ability because of adequate food for the learner (with take-home rations) cannot be proven as there is no way of telling that it is the learner who actually eats the food.

Given that in most emergency situations food is cooked on an open fire, it is very difficult to provide it before the learning period, which undermines the use of school meals to counter short-term hunger and 'energies' children for the school

day. The compromise is usually a mid-morning or lunch-time break. All the above mentioned disadvantages of wet feeding apply. In addition, it must be kept in mind that the food is usually the same as is provided in a regular distribution. This means that this food also lacks the micro-nutrients and vitamins required. For a genuine increase in learning ability, these micro-nutrients must also be available.

The issue should not be school feeding or no school feeding but whether it is justified for teachers and school administrators to use time and resources administering an adjunct to an education programme. Could this time be better spent improving the quality of the teaching and learning programme? Could the funding allocated to this area be more effectively

spent improving teacher training? In a cost-benefit analysis, do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? If so, and if school feeding is available, then implement it - but do not expect that it will improve teaching quality or solve curriculum problems. If the disadvantages are not outweighed by the advantages, then leave school feeding and concentrate on the real education issues.

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Refugees place a high value on education. Increasing numbers of refugee children are now receiving primary schooling but too few have access to secondary education. There is still a massive discrepancy between average refugee enrolment in secondary school - 7% - and the average enrolment for nationals - 18% - in the least developed countries. The discrepancy is markedly greater for girls.

Education is the pathway out of hardship and despair. Education gives refugee youth self-esteem, dignity and the chance to solve their own problems. Education is more than the ability to write and read: it is also about learning to understand the complexity of life, to be creative during adolescence, to broaden the mind and to cultivate the body through sports.

Since the end of 2001 the RET has worked in partnership with schools, parent-teacher associations and local implementing partners in Tanzania, Pakistan, Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, South Africa, Colombia and Ecuador to improve

teaching standards, increase attendance rates and ensure inclusion of girls, those with special needs and other marginalised groups.

Seven million displaced youth around the world remain deprived of their right to a post-primary education. Let's do more together to give them the opportunity.

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*Copies are available free of charge. Contact: Isabel Byron, Assistant Programme Specialist, International Bureau of Education, C.P. 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.  
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