Why school feeding works

by Ute Meir

School meals encourage displaced children to attend class and help them concentrate on their studies. In 2003 the UN World Food Programme (WFP) fed more than 15 million children in schools in 69 countries, many of them recovering from conflict. From Afghanistan to Angola school-feeding schemes are assisting reintegration. Surveys show that when food is available at school, enrolments can double within a year and children’s attention span and academic performance increase.

Children who have lived through wars have unique needs and school feeding can be linked to additional school-based interventions to address them. Basic skills and training programmes can form the beginning of more structured schooling. Such programmes can promote psychosocial recovery and teach landmine awareness, youth health, vocational and life skills. Improving food security can slow the spread of HIV/AIDS by keeping young people healthy and active and removing the need for risky behaviour such as selling blood or sexual favours. The combination of food and education can help child soldiers safely trade in their weapons for food, learning and counselling.

In recent years school feeding has helped young people recover from conflict:

- Within a year of the collapse of the Taliban, WFP was able to feed 350,000 school children.
- Three months after conflict ceased in Liberia, school-feeding programmes reached 132,000 children; towards the end of the 2003-04 school year, the Back-to-Peace, Back-to-School operation in Liberia was feeding 280,000 students.
- At the end of 2003 700,000 Iraqi schoolchildren received school meals.

When planning school-feeding programmes it is important to be clear about objectives and the educational context.

Is the goal to raise enrolment and attendance, improve learning, reduce the drop-out rate or tackle gender gaps? What are the factors which keep children out of school, induce them to leave or work against girls’ education – hunger, poor health, distance to school, insecurity, poor buildings and/or poor teachers? Is school feeding part of the answer?

Is there adequate funding and other support – from WFP, NGOs, governments, the private sector, parents and/or communities? For how long is funding available? Has an exit strategy been identified?

Once the decision to start a programme is taken, planners have to decide on the appropriate programme modality: wet feeding or take-home rations.

Wet feeding – preparation and delivery of meals on school premises – improves enrolment, attendance, retention and learning but is relatively complicated to implement, requiring schools to have at least basic feeding infrastructure – kitchen, store room, eating area, water supply, fuelwood supplies, condiments and cooking utensils. High start-up costs may not be justified when a programme is only expected to be of short duration. Care must be taken to ensure use of locally acceptable and easy-to-prepare commodities. The timing of meals/snacks is important. Children need to eat as soon as possible when arriving at school. Wet feeding can be combined with de-worming treatments to overcome the debilitating effects of intestinal worms on health and ability to study.

Dry, take-home food rations bring children back to school and keep them there. However, nutritional effects cannot be guaranteed: food rations may be sold or shared by the pupil’s family. Improvement in attendance may only occur if food distribution is made conditional on regular, properly-monitored, presence in class. Take-home rations are easier to implement and can be targeted specifically to disadvantaged groups of students, such as girls or children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS.

Commodities should be of high local value (such as vegetable oil or local staple cereal) but of low volume and easy to transport. Supplies are usually distributed on a monthly basis but can be less frequent and targeted to the local lean season. If rations are only given to girls it is essential to discuss the reasons for positive discrimination with communities, parents and school staff before commencement. Families need to be reassured that the food ration benefits the whole family and that it can compensate for the costs of girls’ lost labour.

Under the UNESCO/WFP Cooperative Programme, the two organisations work together to promote Education for All, including in situations of emergencies and recovery. Our 40 years’ experience of school feeding shows that it is important to:

- ensure that local education ministries have ownership, however low their initial implementation capacity
- involve local communities/parents from the outset but be careful not to shift too many costs to them
- regularly monitor to ensure programmes are really reaching those most in need;
- keep infrastructure requirements as basic as possible so as not to exclude schools damaged by conflict
- advocate and raise awareness about the importance of educating girls
- endeavour, whenever possible, to make school feeding part of a wider package of support addressing other obstacles to enrolment, retention and learning.
School feeding is an effective incentive for poor families to send and keep their children in school. It also serves as an excellent platform for initiatives that improve educational quality and keep children healthy. WFP plans to dramatically expand school-feeding activities to reach 50 million children by 2008.

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WFP is currently preparing, and requires additional information for, a forthcoming publication entitled School Feeding Works: An Annotated Bibliography. For more information about this, and school-feeding projects, see: www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=1 or email: schoolfeeding@wfp.org

Why school feeding works

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

School 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.

Is school feeding a distraction?

by Pamela Baxter

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