

Why school feeding works

by Ute Meir

Nutrition and learning go hand in hand. School feeding has positive effects on all aspects of schooling – enrolment, attendance and performance.

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.

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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