



Frequently Asked Questions Mary's Meals in Malawi

Q) About Mary's Meals

- *What is school feeding, and why are you so enthusiastic about it?*
- *Has there been any independent research carried out on school feeding which supports the claims that Mary's Meals makes?*
- *Who is Mary, and why is Mary's Meals named after her?*
- *Is it a religious organisation, and is it for the benefit of children of any particular faith?*
- *Is there any proselytising or evangelisation that is undertaken in the name of Mary's Meals?*
- *Is every Mary's Meals programme exactly the same in every country where Mary's Meals operates?*
- *Why is there a significant difference in the costs to feed a child in Malawi, and the cost of feeding a child in, for example, Eastern European countries like the Ukraine?*

Q) Basic Education and Benefits

- *What good can a basic education do?*
- *Doesn't it show poor motivation to learn if a child attends school mainly because they are receiving a meal?*
- *Does every child benefit from formal education by going to school?*
- *I don't think Mary's Meals can contribute significantly to the problems that are faced when providing education in the developing world. There are too many other things that stop children getting an education, not simply a lack of food.*
- *What about: lack of teacher training, no classrooms, poor repair of classrooms, no furniture, no school materials, no lesson materials, no water supply, poor sanitation - isn't Mary's Meals downplaying these problems by concentrating on school feeding?*
- *Does Mary's Meals disagree with school fees for poor children?*
- *What about gender issues, such as discrimination against girls – does Mary's Meals do anything to tackle this?*

Q) Hunger and Food Security

- *Aren't there better ways of tackling child hunger, such as providing rations or jobs for families or helping them start up businesses?*
- *Wouldn't a better approach be helping poor farmers produce more food for their families and country?*
- *Why won't Mary's Meals devote its resources to other ways of improving food security?*
- *Can you be sure that the food is getting to the children - what if there is corruption in the schools or at the local level?*
- *Does Mary's Meals import food into Malawi, or does it use local food?*

Q) Local Community and Volunteers

- *Isn't the concept of school feeding patronising – a first world country imposing its own solutions on a developing country whose only choice is to accept?*
- *Doesn't school feeding remove the responsibility of parents for feeding their own children?*
- *What about the responsibilities of the local government?*
- *Can the local community eventually provide the food for school feeding?*
- *Why does Mary's Meals lean on the work of volunteers to cook the meals in primary schools – if the local community really is very poor, is it fair to expect it to contribute so much? Wouldn't it be fairer to employ cooks?*
- *What's the difference between the nursery daycare volunteers in Malawi, and the primary school volunteers?*
- *Why do local men seldom participate in cooking the meals?*

Q) Sustainability and Long-Term School Feeding

- *Isn't the Mary's Meals model of school feeding unsustainable?*
- *If school feeding doesn't seem as if it can be self-supporting in the near future in the poorest areas, does this make it a badly-designed project?*
- *Does Mary's Meals intend to be involved in school feeding permanently?*
- *Won't long-term support create an attitude of dependency?*
- *Is there really a significant problem with short-term school feeding programmes?*
- *Why does Mary's Meals place so much emphasis on continuity with school feeding programmes?*
- *What makes Mary's Meals school feeding methods different from those of many other organisations?*
- *What strategies is Mary's Meals adopting to ensure that its commitment to these children will continue?*

Q) Practical Methods and Costs of Mary's Meals

- *What about younger children – don't they deserve to be fed just as much as the primary aged children do?*
- *What happens to the children on school holidays – aren't they vulnerable to hunger then, too?*
- *What happens to children after they leave primary school?*
- *Isn't it misleading to emphasise how cheaply a child can be fed a single meal every school day in a place like Malawi – doesn't it cut corners and leave a lot unanswered?*
- *What kind of meals do children receive, and does it have REAL nutritional value for them?*
- *Is it just a marketing device to say that a child can be fed for £6.15, or is this accurate?*
- *How much of the money raised by donors goes on administration costs?*

O) Poverty in General

- *Why does there seem to be little progress in tackling poverty worldwide, and why should donors still give money to charities like Mary's Meals?*
- *Why should we think we have any responsibility towards children on the other side of the world?*
- *What about poverty and needs in Britain – doesn't charity begin at home?*
- *Doesn't the world have more urgent priorities than universal education to concentrate on, such as tackling climate change, preventing deadly diseases, or creating world peace?*
- *Is there much hope that Mary's Meals can make a difference, or is it just another scheme destined to fade away?*
- *What might be Mary's Meals' contribution to making poverty history?*

A) About Mary's Meals

- ***What is school feeding, and why are you so enthusiastic about it?***

It's a simple way of helping a child escape some of the worst yet most common poverty traps. A hungry or malnourished child generally doesn't go to school, and if they do go, it is almost impossible for them to concentrate and keep up with their well fed peers ... and if they have no education, their prospects for the future diminish and it is overwhelmingly likely that they will remain poor for the rest of their lives, especially as more educated peers are equipped to race ahead of them. School feeding is the provision of food, usually a meal, at school. In the developed world, we have a variety of ways of making sure our children get a meal at school. In developing countries, school feeding is a way to support some of the most vulnerable children on earth today – those who have so little to eat that it negatively affects their behaviour and choices today, to the point that deprivation robs them of their future. School feeding attracts children into school and makes education accessible to those who would otherwise have to do household chores or earn income during the school day instead.

There were 72 million primary aged children in the world in 2007 who did not attend school, and 175 million of the world's young children suffered malnutrition. (UNESCO, Education For All Global Monitoring Report, "Reaching The Marginalized", 2010, Oxford University Press, p.1) Generally, the children who do not go to school are also children who suffer hunger: the two deprivations are linked across generations and across social classes. They are the children who live from hand-to-mouth, and are too busy trying to survive to go to school.

Our enthusiasm for school feeding is because it aims to combat these two problems together, and thus benefits the poorest children most dramatically, and complements efforts being made by others to improve the quantity and quality of school provision. Furthermore, the idea is so common-sense and straightforward, that it attracts the attention and co-operation of the local community, ensuring that it will be a success in practice.

- ***Has there been any independent research carried out on school feeding which supports the claims that Mary's Meals makes?***

School feeding is a standard part of the relief and development repertoire. There is a large body of research on school feeding programmes, emphasising the vital links between provision of food and attendance at school, and between good nutrition and educational performance. This research has concentrated on many different aspects of school feeding and its benefits, and the verdict is that it is worthwhile and effective for poor countries.

Given the solid and positive links between education and good nutrition, there is much evidence pointing to the benefits of increased levels of school feeding. The most fundamental barrier to overcome in childhood education is the barrier which prevents enrolment or initial attendance. Factors preventing girls' education are effectively challenged by helping to meet a family's immediate needs (Miller Del Rosso, 1999). Numerous studies reiterate the immediate improvements in pupil

attendance (Cueto, 2000; Gulliford, 2002; Kent et al, 1997; Miller Del Rosso, 1999; Rogers et al, 2002) – school feeding is probably the single most effective tool to draw poor children to school and keep them there.

The research that concentrates on the benefits of good nutrition also creates a resounding call in favour of school feeding. Harper et al (2003) note the devastating effects of hunger: the effects of malnutrition in impairing cognitive development in the short window of early childhood are irreversible, and repercussions life-long. Such children

“... may find learning more difficult, both at school and in terms of important life skills. Where this leads to difficulties obtaining skills or qualifications, their future labour market opportunities and thus earning prospects may be constrained ... Girls who grow up stunted or anaemic are more likely to be underdeveloped for childbirth, and face higher risks of maternal and child mortality, and of low birth weight and stunting among their own children ...”

Rogers et al (2002) and The Chronic Poverty Report (Grant, 2004) argue similarly that the poorest sector of society is incapable of tolerating the shock caused by food shortages – these are the families who benefit most from social safety nets such as school feeding. The demonstrated gains from better nutrition for school-aged children are significant. Cueto et al's Peruvian school feeding study reports that “positive effects were found on haemoglobin, drop-out rates and attendance” (2000); likewise Moock et al's Nepalese study (1986) states arrestingly that:

“If the economic benefits of improving nutritional status can be legitimately calculated to include the higher productivity of a more educated adult population ... as well as the treatment savings from a better nourished, less disease-prone child population, it may turn out that an investment in child nutrition is one of the best investments a developing country can make.”

The 2010 Education For All Global Monitoring Report, “Reaching The Marginalized”, the latest annual report to show annual progress worldwide towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal of every child receiving a primary school education, considers the effect of school feeding programmes alongside other social protection programmes. “Well designed school feeding programmes that include micronutrient fortification and deworming provide significant nutritional benefits. They can increase school attendance and educational achievement (Bundy et al, 2009b); Kristjansson et al., 2007); Miguel and Kremer, 2004). Many programmes incorporate a strong gender dimension by making special provision for girls' nutrition. One survey in sub-Saharan Africa covering 32 countries and 4,000 primary schools receiving World Food Programme support found that school feeding had marked benefits on school participation (World Food Programme, 2007).” While the design of the school feeding is important to achieve optimal outcomes, as a tool for school enrolment of the marginalised, the benefits of school feeding are barely disputed.

The claims that Mary's Meals makes for its ability to make significant improvements in the lives of thousands of children in Malawi has sound theoretical backing, as well as practical application.

Sources cited (this is a select bibliography from a much larger body of studies):

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- Harper & Marcus (2003) ***Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Lifecourse and Intergenerational Poverty Transmissions***, World Development, Vol 31 (3), 535-554
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- Miller Del Rosso, Joy (1999) ***School Feeding Programs: Improving Effectiveness and Increasing the Benefit to Education: A Guide for Program Managers***, Oxford: The Partnership for Child Development
- Miller Del Rosso, J. & T. Marek (1996) ***Class Action - Improving School Performance in the Developing World Through Better Health and Nutrition***, Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank
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- Rogers, B. L. & J. Coates (2002) ***Food-Based Safety Nets and Related Programs***, TUFTS Nutrition, Discussion Paper No 12, <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/publications/fpan/>
- UNESCO (2010) ***Reaching The Marginalized***, Oxford University Press
- ***Who is Mary, and why is Mary's Meals named after her?***

It is named after Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary is a highly respected figure in the two largest world religions, and she is a woman that billions of people around the world are familiar with and can relate to. In her lifetime, she experienced the struggle of a parent to bring a child up in poverty, while ensuring that her child was nurtured and could develop into a healthy individual.

Mary is also a figurehead for this project because of the strong personal aspect of our work. The work of volunteers in Malawi who carry out the school feeding from day to day invest so much personal effort and care, that Mary's Meals truly rests on their motivation and determination, and the use of a personal name reflects the spirit of this movement. Mary's Meals is a work that comes from the hearts of all sorts of people who are united by the universal desires of families for their children – to provide for children and equip them for the future.

Mary's Meals is sustained by the people at the heart of it, and their conviction, decisions and hard work. For all these reasons, Mary, being probably the most famous mother who ever existed, is a powerfully evocative symbol for this work. She has an especially profound connection to those millions of people living with dignity, courage and hope amid present poverty.

- ***Is it a religious organisation, and is it for the benefit of children of any particular faith?***

No – Mary's Meals is not a religious organisation. Many of the people who work for Mary's Meals are motivated by their religious faith, but all creeds find common ground in the humanitarian focus of Mary's Meals: to help the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children on earth. We have found great determination and devotion to these aims among missionaries and secular organizations alike, and we value collaboration with any person who shares the same aims as Mary's Meals, which are not exclusive to any faith system. Concentrating on the eradication of hunger and deprivation of education is surely an aim that can unite all humanitarians, irrespective of their religion or creed.

Meals are provided for children from all faith backgrounds and none, and our mandate as a charity directs us simply to focus on those in greatest need. Care is taken in Malawi to benefit all schools existing in a severely deprived area, which means that every creed present will benefit. As the people who form our funding base are motivated by a wide variety of beliefs, care is taken for our funding to be disbursed impartially.

- ***Is there any proselytising or evangelisation that is undertaken in the name of Mary's Meals?***

No, there is no evangelisation through Mary's Meals. Even although 'Mary's Meals' is the campaign name, which publicises our initiative and makes it a recognisable campaign in the developed world, the name is not necessarily important or even known to the child who received Mary's Meals. To that child, it is simply a meal, and it is given to enable them to go to school, not to win them over to any faith system by giving them material advantages. Mary's Meals does not come with any conditions attached other than encouragement for the child to go to school.

- ***Is every Mary's Meals programme exactly the same in every country where Mary's Meals operates?***

Depending on cultural and social differences, Mary's Meals can differ significantly from country to country. There are varying kinds of need in different areas, and also different groups of children who are eligible to receive Mary's Meals.

In Malawi, and also in Liberia, Uganda, Kenya and Haiti, there is a broad need for school feeding on a very large scale, as poverty is very widespread, and generally is homogeneous across the population. In these situations we would feed the entire school or institution.

However, in other countries, for example, India, Bolivia, Romania, Albania, Bosnia, Ukraine and the Philippines, poverty can be more localised, with particular sections

of society being very vulnerable and able to benefit from Mary's Meals, while many of their peers would instead be easily supported by their families. In such areas, Mary's Meals is often tailored to help tackle a particular social problem. The shape of these programmes is much more dependent on local circumstances and expertise, due to the complex social problems they deal with.

To name a few of the disadvantages that the chance for improved nutrition and education can help to overcome:

- Mary's Meals in India is helping to overcome barriers to education faced by children from untouchable castes;
- in Bolivia it is helping abandoned and disabled children, and those who are ghettoized in extremely poor barrios;
- in Romania, Mary's Meals is providing for the stigmatised Roma community to help provide them with equal opportunities in Romanian society;
- in Albania it has been feeding children who live in very remote rural regions, who become cut off from the rest of the world during harsh and punishing winters and suffer particular hardship;
- in Bosnia, Mary's Meals feeds neglected children in orphanage institutions;
- and in both the Ukraine and the Philippines, Mary's Meals is a step on a path to school for street children who have suffered many abuses and deprivations.

In providing Mary's Meals in this way, many additional challenges are encountered. These programmes extend beyond supporting a school, because such children have sunk beneath the general state of the majority of the population, and their situation is often deliberately hidden, requiring much closer involvement with the child's environment to overcome obstacles and help them to access their rights. It is harder to reach these children to offer them opportunities, and the large disparities between them and other children of their age can be very wide. It is therefore harder to bridge the gap between disadvantaged children and other children, and thus requires different strategies and greater resources. However, every child has exactly the same basic needs: the daily need for nourishing food, and an education that will give them choices in life.

- ***Why is there a significant difference in the costs to feed a child in Malawi, and the cost of feeding a child in, for example, Eastern European countries like the Ukraine?***

One difference is the economy of the country where we are providing Mary's Meals. Basic food costs in Malawi are much lower than in the Ukraine, so equivalent quantities of food are far more expensive in the Ukraine. Basic food prices are a good indication of how poor or rich a country is in general. The lower the cost of food, the lower earnings may be, since employers of the poor often pay only enough to cover basic subsistence costs; the local government can't get much tax out of the population because no surplus is generated, and it will have less resources available to generate income to fund public goods such as education; and as a whole, the country may have food that is cheap by western standards, but certainly not cheap according to what local people can afford. This is the situation in Malawi. It may seem surprisingly inexpensive to feed a child a meal in Malawi every school day for just over £6, but if the daily earnings of an adult are literally the equivalent of pennies, the shock is really that there can be such a huge difference between the earning power of Malawians and the average person in Britain. In Britain it is often the case that when we have paid our weekly food bill and other essentials, there can

be a significant amount left over. For Malawians, it is frequently impossible even to cover the food bill on their earnings.

On the other hand, basic food costs in the Ukraine are much higher because a significant part of the population is wealthy, driving food costs up since many people can afford to spend more. Healthy, nutritious food cannot be bought cheaply just because you are poor: if general prices go up, you will have to pay just as much as wealthier people who can afford it more. For street children in the Ukraine, this is practically impossible, unless they turn to stealing or prostitution – which further stigmatises them, makes people exploit or avoid them, and makes it more difficult for them to meet their daily needs – a severe downward spiral. This is another aspect which makes a child in Malawi easier to reach, and a child in the Ukraine hard to reach: a poor child in Malawi can easily be encouraged to go to school, whereas a street child in the Ukraine is as good as driven out of school, both by society and by the behaviour that helps them survive on the street. The Malawian child needs to be enabled to take up opportunities that most of the nation is aspiring to; the Ukrainian street child needs to be slowly re-introduced to a society that already has rejected him or her. Thus, more resources have to be spent on ways of reaching the very poorest children in moderately affluent areas, because the general increase in wealth in their country has already passed them by and has not benefited them. These are all reasons why it can cost much more to feed a child in one country than a child in another country, even if equivalent meals are provided.

A) Basic Education and Benefits

- ***What good can a basic education do?***

It has been proven many times that one of the most effective routes to broad-based development in a country is access to basic education. Education plays a positive role in increasing income, improving long-term food security, equity, health, and decreasing family size: Harper et al (2003) remarks that these transformative changes are essentially unlikely to occur in the absence of education, so getting children to go to school is vitally important, as the benefits for them are too great to miss out on.

Education is, by definition, what gives a person understanding, knowledge, training and stimulation, and develops and refines their innate capacities. It is clear that a population which enjoys the fulfillment of the right to education will be able to contribute to the life of their nation in a positive and responsible way. However, if you have no choice as a child to go to school, but have to labour for your daily bread, this basic right is no more than an idealistic dream. A person who is deprived of a basic education will find it almost impossible to enforce their rights to equality, or to access to the knowledge they need to make decisions about their lives.

The international community has recognised this reality for decades, and many movements to promote and realise universal primary education have resulted. Some of these are listed below.

- Education for All:
 - http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=50558&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
 - http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=51465&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- Millennium Development Goals:
 - <http://www.unicef.org/mdg/>

It now remains to make these goals a reality – but if obstacles such as hunger continue to prevent children from going to school, attempts to achieve universal primary education will inevitably fail, and the world will be inestimably poorer for it.

- ***Doesn't it show poor motivation to learn if a child attends school mainly because they are receiving a meal?***

Common sense would say that many children (whether in Malawi or elsewhere) may appreciate their friends or their lunch-break more than their lessons – but this doesn't stop them from learning when they are in school. Hunger, on the other hand, can stop them learning. Also, in Malawi, for the most part children *are* genuinely aware that going to school is a privilege – for most children, the opportunity has not been around for long enough to be taken for granted.

There is an important difference between a child who *wants* to study but is hungry, and a child who is less directly motivated to study but doesn't have to worry about hunger. For the first child, the desire to study may give way to being disheartened and frustrated as she or he falls behind in class. No matter how hard she tries to

work, there is a limit to how well she can concentrate, or how well her brain can function under the stress of hunger. Hunger is the biggest distraction and demotivator of all, and poor nutrition contributes to ill health, stunted growth and limited mental capacity. In the second case, the child who is well fed is more likely to have the energy to concentrate, to grasp her lessons better and to perform well, and her confidence and ability are free to grow from day to day. She will also be less likely to fall behind in school because of absence and ill health.

It is better to clear the way for children to learn by taking logical steps to help them, rather than placing a heavy burden on their shoulders and expecting them to get as far as more privileged children who receive the help they need.

- ***Does every child benefit from formal education by going to school?***

There are many transferable skills that we simply take for granted that come through a formal basic education, and can be used in any walk of life. For example, if you cannot read, you will not be able to follow newspapers, or read books, and you will not be able to deepen your knowledge or skills without depending on others to train you. You will miss out on many things that are common knowledge, and this will put you at a constant disadvantage. You will be less able to exercise many of your rights, such as the right to express your political views, because you cannot record your views in as effective a manner as a literate person. Neither will you be as successful in challenging laws that affect you, or righting injustices that you suffer. It will be harder for you to communicate with others, in an age when communications are rapid and make life move at an ever faster pace, and this will force you to rely on people's goodwill to help you through. If you have no numerical skills, you can be easily cheated or taken advantage of by others who are better educated and have access to information that allows them to invest better than you can.

Education is powerful because not only does it impart skills, but it creates confidence and equips people to make well-informed decisions. It gives you skills to apply to be better at whatever you wish to do, and this is applicable to any occupation, not just academic ones.

- ***I don't think Mary's Meals can contribute significantly to the problems that are faced when providing education in the developing world. There are too many other things that stop children getting an education, not simply a lack of food.***

This objection to Mary's Meals is sometimes raised: that since there is a multiplicity of problems that can exist in any given school which affect the quality of education, Mary's Meals has failed if it provides school meals but does not go on to solve every other problem. Every need is valid, but Mary's Meals is a specific movement to help feed every hungry child in the world, and help them to attend school. Mary's Meals believes that in this instance, some needs are objectively more urgent than others. Hunger is one of the most serious problems a child can face, because it is one of the most physically and socially damaging.

We do not seek to dismiss or belittle any of the other problems in schools, nor to deny their existence or play down their negative effects. However, we believe strongly that if you can't do everything, at least do something, and providing a meal to a hungry child is an excellent way to start. We cannot see a reason to abandon a

good cause because of overwhelming needs: it helps more to tackle one issue at a time and continue gathering resources and improving awareness along the way.

- ***What about: lack of teacher training, no classrooms, poor repair of classrooms, no furniture, no school materials, no lesson materials, no water supply, poor sanitation - isn't Mary's Meals downplaying these problems by concentrating on school feeding?***

Mary's Meals is seen as a solid base for other ways of helping a school – but we do not believe that we have solved every problem simply by feeding children. However, we maintain that the difference that Mary's Meals makes is extremely powerful and is so important that it can't be substituted by another intervention.

To tackle some of the other dire problems in schools, we run a number of different schemes alongside Mary's Meals which are aimed at meeting more types of need. One of these schemes is the Back Pack Project, which runs alongside Mary's Meals. This scheme provides some of the items that a child would use daily in school, such as a pencil case, a copy book, and other essential items such as clothes, shoes, a towel and a ball. These back packs help encourage children to go to school, and to take pride in their education. For many of these children, it will be the first time in their life they have received such a gift, which makes a great difference to them. For most of these children, there is no way of obtaining these goods by themselves, and their families would find it very difficult to provide them for them. These packs are donated by children in the UK and other countries, and have proved to be an effective way of helping children in one country reach out to impoverished children in other countries.

In some instances we gather detailed information on the material needs of schools we work in, and consider how best to help the school meet these needs, whether through occasional funding from Mary's Meals (for example to fund a borehole), putting them in touch with another organisation working in Malawi specialising in building, water, medical care or something else, or helping the community see how they can provide the item themselves or advocate for the item with local government. While other organizations may be able to work effectively with us, it is generally found that they can fundraise more effectively through their own networks by focusing on their own independently chosen emphases.

Some needs (such as the training and payment of teachers, maintenance and building of schools) require the infrastructure and authority of the local government , and properly remain the domain of local authorities. On the other hand, the issue of child hunger stands at an intersection of responsibilities: those of the parents, the local community, the local government, and also the international community. It is therefore appropriate to bring various actors together to alleviate child hunger in school.

We also accept that in poor countries such as Malawi, the government can be limited in the provisions it can make for education, because it cannot bring in revenue from taxes in the way that rich countries may do, and therefore it has limited resources to spend on education. However, this will continue to be the case so long as the general population is so poor, as often people do not generate even enough to support themselves and their families. This general situation could improve greatly with the education of present and future generations of young people, who would be in a better place than their parents' generation to climb out of dire poverty.

- ***Does Mary's Meals disagree with school fees for poor children?***

In many countries, poor children's families are forced to pay fees for their education, due to political priorities. It is deeply unfair towards those sections of society which will be further deprived and violated if they cannot access education. We welcome any efforts and movements that seek to achieve free universal primary education, especially the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. We believe that this is perfectly achievable, but also that Mary's Meals can help to make this goal a reality by reinforcing the benefits of free education, attracting even those children for whom the abolition of school fees has meant that they still cannot go to school, because it has not changed their daily fight for food and survival.

In many countries, including Malawi, basic primary education is provided for free. This doesn't necessarily mean there is no cost at all involved for the child or her or his family, but that no school fees need to be paid for the child to gain admittance to classes, as teachers are employed by the government and not privately by parents. This approach truly is a step in the right direction, and has led to a massive influx of school-goers who were previously barred from going to school simply because they could not afford even very small fees. And certainly, this has put pressure on the school system, because it has shown just how inadequate the current resources are in countries like Malawi to meet the needs of every school-age child in the country. However, backtracking to the days of fee-paying for all schools is not a good option, even if it is correlated with better quality education: poor countries need more resources to meet the needs of their children, not stricter policies of saying no to some children.

To some extent, school uniforms, books, desks and other durable materials can be passed from one child to the next and recycled in this way, but compulsory school fees are a much more serious obstacle. We would maintain that school fees among the poorest communities are an injustice and force families to make costly sacrifices, and different ways of financially running a school should be pursued.

In instances where Mary's Meals is providing school feeding in schools that do charge small fees from parents, for example in Haiti, the cost of the food that we provide per child is much greater than the fees that are payable to the school to cover teachers' wages. So, for example, the cost of the meal children receive throughout the year (covered by Mary's Meals) is at least ten times as much as the cost of school fees (covered by the parents). This is regarded as an investment, because it frees up resources for the family over the long run. We also consider it a priority to work with partners in these areas whose aim is to provide free education in the most deprived areas, finding teachers' wages from sources other than fees, and which have put in place safety nets and ways of reaching the very poorest children.

Despite some possibilities of working in these ways, we maintain that the abolition of school fees is perfectly achievable and necessary.

- ***What about gender issues, such as discrimination against girls – does Mary's Meals do anything to tackle this?***

Many girls do not go to school because their families believe it will bring no benefits to them. Other families value the work that a girl can do at home, and if it is hard to make ends meet, a girl's contribution to the household during the school day may be seen as essential for her own survival and her family's. Introducing meals in school changes these dynamics, because going to school will be seen as a practical thing to do in the short term, to get an extra meal, even if the long term benefits are not clearly seen. The abolition of school fees has gone a long way towards encouraging families to allow girls to attend school, especially as they do not have to make a choice between sending a girl or her brothers because of fees. School feeding can reinforce this process, as food is required by every child regardless of gender.

Mary's Meals volunteers are predominantly female. As they become more involved in the school environment, more personal contact with the school can encourage them to become enthusiastic about ensuring that their daughters and female relatives have the opportunity to attend school. Female teachers have also remarked on the fact that they are well respected in their local communities, and through this parents begin to see the value of education for their daughters. It also has positive implications through generations: a girl who has been able to attend school will almost certainly send her daughters to school, whereas an illiterate mother more frequently decides against it.

A) Hunger and Food Security

- ***Aren't there better ways of tackling child hunger, such as providing rations or jobs for families or helping them set up businesses?***

It is important to stress that Mary's Meals is focused strongly on education. Our focus is therefore on the environment of the school, and our main goal is to maintain school attendance in areas that are so poor that many children have no guarantee that they will even eat once a day. Providing rations to families or distributing food in other ways may not aid school attendance, because it does not put the focus on school. Providing rations can often result in food provided being sold on the market, and thus does not result in increased school enrolment or attendance. Providing a meal in school every day circumvents these problems. Mary's Meals recognises the serious problem hunger poses for regular school attendance, and provides a daily school meal that helps to remove this critical obstacle.

To eradicate child hunger globally, the contribution of many other actors is needed across the world stage. Mary's Meals naturally complements the activities of hundreds of thousands of different organisations, all working together to try to eradicate poverty. Mary's Meals will play its part by remaining faithful to the idea of encouraging children to go to school by making sure hunger doesn't prevent them from attending.

- ***Wouldn't a better approach be helping poor farmers produce more food for their families and country?***

Mary's Meals concentrates on schools rather than agriculture or employment. Although there are positive implications for agriculture when education is widespread, it is not the direct job of a school to boost agriculture, but to teach a variety of skills that can be applied to life. Such skills are increasingly important to countries and to their citizens, as development means that people will increasingly require skills outside agriculture.

While societies are still very poor, school feeding can alleviate child hunger on a regular basis. It has the further benefit of ensuring that one of the most vulnerable groups in society, children, are accurately targeted and reached. The same guarantee of food security among children cannot be assumed in the improvement of agricultural practices, as benefits may not filter through to children (especially orphans), and the problem of child hunger may remain for a variety of reasons.

We agree that the improvement of agricultural practices is extremely important, but, having an educational focus, it is not a concern Mary's Meals can directly take on, although we particularly welcome any improvements that can be made in this area by other actors.

- ***Why won't Mary's Meals devote its resources to other ways of improving food security?***

We specialise in school feeding, for which there is tremendous need in the world, and whose need exceeds our capacity to meet at present - and we are determined to maintain our focus so long as that same need continues.

We see clearly that there are many other areas which would reinforce and support the same needs that Mary's Meals aims to tackle, but as these areas range as wide and far as tackling the HIV/AIDS crisis, providing basic healthcare, improving agriculture, communications, policy and law, we are determined to pursue a strategy of a) working in tune with those who strengthen our work, and b) resisting the temptation to take on tasks that do not form the core of our work, which other specialised bodies would be better concentrating on.

For this reason, although it is tempting to get involved in, for instance, agriculture, and improve community food security from this angle, this is not our area of expertise, while there are plenty of organisations who already specialise in this. Therefore, we do not see Mary's Meals moving away from school feeding to tackle root causes that lie outside the reach of a school. We also recognise that many of the children who are strengthened today by Mary's Meals to attend and complete their education will take their place as tomorrow's decision-makers in solving these problems, in the rich variety of ways necessary. It is Mary's Meals' aim to support these children so that they can realize their potential and make a free choice about the path they choose to take.

- ***Can you be sure that the food is getting to the children - what if there is corruption in the schools or at the local level?***

A number of formal and informal systems are in place to ensure that no food is liable to be misdirected but reaches the children for whom it is intended. Deliveries are carefully calculated and monitored so that the right quantities of food are delivered to each school; the food is securely stored in a storeroom built by Mary's Meals in each school; the local community often employs a watchman to guard the storeroom; the keys to the storeroom are held by different members of the Parent Teacher Association on a rotating basis and the stock is carefully monitored. Food is delivered once a month by Mary's Meals so that the supply is regular and reliable; and volunteers are carefully instructed on how much food to prepare and provide per child. Mugs are a standard and generous size to ensure that each child is fed equally.

Mary's Meals employs monitors who visit schools regularly, and conduct random spot-checks to ensure first of all that feeding is being carried out daily, and also that each child is receiving the amount of food that has been allocated for them. Food stores are also independently examined and records are kept of the monthly food delivery and any problems encountered (e.g., shortages, or transport problems). If the number of children in a school rises and there is a request for more food to provide for additional meals, this information is passed on to monitors who verify the change in numbers and adjust the deliveries accordingly.

Each of these measures helps to create an atmosphere of transparency and accountability, avoiding weak links that encourage corruption or reduce food for children.

- ***Does Mary's Meals import food into Malawi, or does it use local food?***

Mary's Meals does not export food from donor countries. The Likuni Phala used for Mary's Meals in Malawi is made from maize bought from local farmers, which is factory processed by reputable local suppliers, strictly following national food standards. Buying food locally means that there is a regular food supply, benefiting local farmers, as Mary's Meals has become a major buyer of Likuni Phala in Blantyre. In most countries where Mary's Meals is provided, the meals are made with locally produced food.

A) Local Community and Volunteers

- ***Isn't the concept of school feeding patronising – a first world country imposing its own solutions on a developing country whose only choice is to accept?***

Mary's Meals' popularity in Malawi as well as in all other countries where Mary's Meals are provided is continually creating pressure that it be expanded to meet more need in additional schools. The demand comes from communities themselves, just as the mechanism to make it happen from day to day also originates locally. Mary's Meals depends on the work of volunteers, who would not commit their time and energy if it was not a cause that was held dear to their hearts.

The idea of feeding and educating children is universal. Most communities around the world agree that bringing a child's body and mind to its full potential and good health is the responsibility and duty of society. The benefits of school feeding are recognised clearly by local communities because of the needs it meets, and until those needs go away, Mary's Meals will continue to be welcomed. Mary's Meals assesses the poverty of communities before assisting, ensuring that the need for help is genuine.

- ***Doesn't school feeding remove the responsibility of parents for feeding their own children?***

Parents will struggle to provide what they can, but in the very poorest areas there are limits that have to be recognised concerning what they can achieve, given the depth of their poverty. Terms such as 'responsibility' and 'empowerment' have very little meaning unless the true situation of a person in dire poverty is appreciated.

Mary's Meals does not remove responsibility from parents and families, who, like all parents across the world, are expected by society to meet the daily needs of their children. However, it helps them out by ensuring that a part of the child's daily nutrition needs will be met among those families too poor to guarantee this by themselves. As the other option such families have is continual suffering, and sometimes failure to survive, it would be cynical to say that providing one simple meal a day will remove parents' responsibility for their children. It is a responsibility they would give anything to be able to meet. In a world that tips the balance so heavily in favor of the rich and expects the poor to catch up miraculously, it misrepresents the situation to claim that a parent would voluntarily prefer continual malnutrition for their children to a decent and healthy future. The very poor remain in a trap of poverty because there is no way out: providing education and a decent meal together is a lifeline for their children.

- ***What about the responsibilities of the local government?***

The abilities of the government reflect the general state of the country. Many poor country governments (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa) face a plethora of problems such as: the HIV/AIDS crisis causing distortions to the workforce, a massive burden on the health services and a rising number of orphans and child-headed families;

successive famines and food shortages caused by unfavourable weather and the poverty of farmers; illiteracy and poverty; debt; and unfair terms of trade that benefit first world countries much more than poor countries.

The choices facing governments in these situations are either to abandon attempts to create adequate provision of education, healthcare and social safety nets, and suffer continued deprivation for many decades, or else accept and request assistance that will help people fight present dire poverty. Yes, indeed, local governments should be responsive to the welfare of their electorate, but without adequate resources they cannot solve all of the country's problems, since the obstacles it faces cripple it. It is clear that they cannot do this alone, without external assistance. In this situation, the broad-based education of the country is even more urgent, as one of the remaining hopes for countries as poor as Malawi is that solutions will be found and pioneered from within.

- ***Can't the local community eventually provide the food for school feeding?***

Some communities do indeed manage to achieve this, but given the depth of poverty in areas that most need school feeding in Malawi, they are few and far between. It requires a considerable increase in the general wealth of the community, and this is unlikely to occur in the absence of education. If the community does genuinely achieve this, the need for school feeding will most likely disappear of its own accord. School feeding which relies on volunteers would be particularly sensitive to these changes, because volunteers are not likely to continue to spend long hours cooking when they are well aware that food is plentiful in every family and their actions as volunteers are therefore not having an impact.

However, even if average levels of wealth may rise, poverty almost always remains in isolated pockets amongst marginalised groups, who remain in need of assistance for a long time. Growing privileges for some can increase the disadvantages for others in the same society, if they are cut off from the benefits others enjoy, for cultural, political or social advances. At this stage, even if there is diminishing need to draw children to school and provide a daily meal, Mary's Meals continues to pay attention to the needs of minorities within the general community who may remain trapped in poverty. Often these marginalised groups are created precisely because of negative community dynamics, such as prejudice, fear or ignorance (for example, stigmas attached to those suffering from leprosy or AIDS) - in which case, the local community is less likely to initiate and sustain a programme for them.

- ***Why does Mary's Meals lean on the work of volunteers to cook the meals in primary schools – if the local community really is very poor, is it fair to expect it to contribute so much? Wouldn't it be fairer to employ cooks?***

The terms under which people in poverty can afford to volunteer are generally different from the options open to wealthier volunteers. A Mary's Meals volunteer does not work 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, because a system built on this kind of expectation would indeed be very unfair and would soon collapse.

Although much time and effort is dedicated by every individual who volunteers to prepare and serve the school meals, it is the policy of Mary's Meals to encourage and

ensure as much community participation as possible, through having the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) recruit large numbers of volunteers, rather than by putting pressure on the hours worked by a few volunteers. In Malawi it takes about five hours to prepare and serve the large quantities of food necessary, so it is indeed a substantial time commitment, but not prohibitively so.

Working with the PTA is also a practical way of ensuring that the community remains involved in the project. For some parents it is the first real opportunity they have had to become closely involved with a school environment, which often leads to greater interest and engagement in their children's education. Many parents affected by poverty will not have had the chance to go to school themselves, and may feel alienated from the school environment – and this can sometimes lead to a failure to appreciate the benefits regular schooling can give. The support of parents is essential in improving the attendance of school children, as parents may choose to withhold their children from school if the benefits are not clear to them but domestic tasks are meanwhile pressing and urgent. Volunteering helps to ease adults into contact with the school, and their work is furthermore readily recognised by teachers and local authorities, conferring status and confidence.

The level of willingness among Malawian communities to volunteer to support the welfare of local children demonstrates a strong ethos that inspires confidence in the intentions and hopes of these families. It also illustrates the high demand for school feeding: recruiting volunteers is never a problem, even when large numbers are required. The inability to feed children is a deeply felt problem, and most adults are seriously motivated to play their part in changing this situation. They certainly are committed to solving the problem through their own contributions and hard work.

- ***What's the difference between the nursery daycare volunteers in Malawi, and the primary school volunteers?***

The under-five nurseries supported by Mary's Meals reach about 1.7% of the children who receive Mary's Meals in Malawi. Unlike the majority of the Mary's Meals volunteers, nursery daycare volunteers work full-time and are trained in basic childcare and community leadership, whereas the primary school volunteers work on a part-time basis and do not take on the role of teachers in any form.

The main task of the daycare volunteers is to care for pre-school orphans in the community, who are particularly vulnerable to neglect and hunger. Daycare volunteers take part in training schemes, giving them accredited certificates on completion of their training, meaning that they are qualified to run a basic under-five daycare centre. The daycare centres take in a mixture of orphaned and needy children (who are cared for without any fees) and children from homes which can afford to pay a small fee for the child's care. This income goes to cover the costs of caring for all the children, and to support the volunteers, who otherwise would be unable to do this full-time work. The system works efficiently in a number of ways: the community is enabled to look after the youngest orphans in the area; the volunteers receive training they would otherwise be unable to access, which allows them to attract families who can pay for their childcare; and parents who send their children to daycare centres find the scheme beneficial because it allows many local mothers to work.

Generally there are four full-time volunteers at the daycare centres, a strict ratio of fee-paying to orphaned and needy children is kept, and the children are provided

with two meals, a breakfast and lunch, each day. The volunteers keep detailed accounts of their expenditure on food, are accountable to each other, have a monthly meeting with Mary's Meals to discuss their plans and problems openly, and are continually supported in their initiatives and needs.

- ***Why do local men seldom participate in cooking the meals?***

In many cultures, the preparation of food is controlled by women. This often demonstrates the active, positive attitude that women have towards their role as nurturers and carers of the community, and underpins their volunteering - it is most often a source of pride that this role be fulfilled. One of the most important areas of life in countries such Malawi is the struggle to survive and provide for the family, and participating in this is a powerful statement of capability.

A) Sustainability and Long-Term School Feeding

- ***Isn't the Mary's Meals model of school feeding unsustainable?***

The answer depends on what one means by 'sustainable'. This could mean being financially sustainable - whether school feeding should be carried out using continual external financial assistance, or whether it should at some point begin to support itself. Or else, it could mean asking whether school feeding is unsustainable in the environmental sense, in terms of being unable to 'meet the needs of today while also meeting the needs of future generations'. In the first case, we are talking about local financial and social sustainability; in the second sense, we would be talking about whether school feeding fits with an ethos of environmentally sustainable development.

If used in a long-term sense, 'sustainable education' means education that reaches the whole country, raising the nation to a level where human skills and capacity are increased and can be used productively, opening up social and economic possibilities. Sooner or later this increases the resources for the country to sustain education by itself, just as all first world countries have enjoyed success in achieving.

So, the answer is a resounding yes: the benefits of school feeding are truly sustainable - over time it will help transform the country into a place where no child goes hungry, a place where every child has a future. We must ask ourselves a further question about sustainability: do we have the patience and insight to continue for as long as it takes to achieve these results? Are we truly interested in a sustainable future?

- ***If school feeding doesn't seem as if it can be self-supporting in the near future in the poorest areas, doesn't this make it a badly designed project?***

Terms like 'sustainability', 'self-supporting' and 'exit strategies' cannot be applied meaningfully to the provision of universal education in poor countries, unless deliberately used in a long term sense. Sustainable development may be a universal ideal for development practitioners, but it is achieved on different time-scales, depending on the nature of the development in question. Some dimensions of projects intended to be sustainable may take a generation or more to have this effect - not everything is possible within a five-year cycle.

Let's look at the alternatives to a programme with a long term reach. If used in a short-term sense, 'sustainable education' and 'sustainable feeding' would simply mean operating through the market mechanism of fees and charges. This would permanently exclude the poorest children from attending school, and in effect, is a way to mire children in their own poverty and the poverty of their family, deepening it in contrast with those who can afford to be educated.

The scandal here is not that the need for school feeding might exist for years or decades, but that a country should be so poor it does not have the minimum wealth to ensure that every child can attend school and is not forced to go hungry. A worldwide system that perpetuates these inequalities is the truly badly designed

element, which school feeding can be powerfully instrumental in tackling in the long run.

It is a circular argument to say that, if school feeding doesn't solve every problem, you should concentrate on another way of tackling poverty. Most attempts at alleviating poverty in a country whose children cannot go to school will have very limited success, as there will be no strong base on which to build development for tomorrow.

- ***Does Mary's Meals intend to be involved in school feeding permanently?***

Scottish International Relief (SIR), which runs Mary's Meals, has thoroughly investigated exit strategies, long term plans and options, and where it is feasible we will work towards withdrawing from areas that no longer require school feeding.

Considerable research has indicated that the logical time-frame of a school feeding programme requires a long-term commitment, for as long as the general context into which it fits is one of dire poverty. This is not an idealistic view, but a realistic one, with reference to the needs that school feeding addresses. A change of perspective on our part would do nothing to change the reality, that school feeding facilitated by outsiders will be beneficial in many parts of the world until the wider problem of deep-rooted poverty is eradicated.

Failure to see things in this way would simply mean a repeated need for programmes to be re-started if they were discontinued too early - we wish to avoid this trap by making a strong commitment to be there for as long as the programmes are needed.

- ***Won't long term support create an attitude of dependency?***

In the long term, Mary's Meals paves the way for lasting freedom from dependency, because it is a serious investment in education, focused on making an impact on the nation's future. A sound education system inclusive of the very poorest child will allow the potential in every child to develop, and will truly promise a move away from dependency on aid.

It is also important to distinguish between the idea of 'dependency' when referring to the children who benefit, and the idea of capable adults or a nation who are dependent on aid. The latter type of dependency of capable adults has taken on very negative connotations, whereas the dependency of children remains legitimate and natural. One way or another, any education system takes for granted the fact that children are dependants. That is to say, children are not assumed to be self-supporting, and if in fact they do support themselves under the age of 16 to the detriment of their education, their work is classed as child labour. A child's ability to go to school every day does indeed rely on the determination of adults to make this possible for them – and their dependency is a matter of trust. This attitude of trust is accepted across all cultures as appropriate, and the responsibility for honouring this trust is recognised as being the duty of adults. Therefore, the needs of the poorest children demonstrate a particularly legitimate dependency, which should last as long as their childhood. Our hope for these children of today is that they will become better equipped than their parents to meet the needs of their own future dependents.

- ***Is there really a significant problem with short-term school feeding programmes?***

Many organisations carry out short-term feeding programmes that last a matter of months after a crisis, or help children cope in a particular period of hunger. Funding can often be found for time-bound and short-term interventions like this. There is no problem with short-term or emergency school feeding as such, but we strongly believe that the situation must be analysed with respect for the underlying needs of the situation, and not with reference only to the easy availability of funding, which most often favours emergency, short-term school feeding programmes. An example of this would be a school feeding programme begun during a famine or drought, or during civil conflict. These programmes are routinely halted after the emergency has somewhat subsided, even although the core problem remains – a large number of children still too hungry to attend school or their families still too poor to spare them to go to school, emergency or no emergency.

This is not a kind of model we routinely hope to follow, apart from in the case of emergencies where the need for school feeding genuinely subsides afterwards (e.g. in an area that may have a temporary emergency but does not have chronic underlying poverty), and where school feeding can be withdrawn with no adverse effects because the community does recover fully from crisis. This, however, is seldom the case in countries like Malawi - one of the poorest places on the planet - because poverty is deep-rooted and crises are cyclical because people do not really escape from poverty from one year to the next. In these places, child hunger is a recurring symptom of the deep poverty of the country, and school attendance suffers consistently due to this.

- ***Why does Mary's Meals place so much emphasis on continuity with school feeding programmes?***

As our focus is on drawing children to school and making it possible for them to remain there, we believe this approach requires as much constancy and stability as the provision of lessons does. Just as schools being closed erratically throughout the school year detracts seriously from the learning experience, similarly, erratic provision of school meals for the poorest children interferes with regular school-going. The continuous nature of Mary's Meals school feeding is because school feeding is inextricably connected to *daily education*, and the obligation to pursue education has to be an ongoing commitment for child, family, school, nation and the whole international community. Therefore, anything that routinely prevents children from attending school regularly requires a staunch commitment to solve it.

In times of crisis, school feeding involves saving lives; in situations of chronic poverty, it is about sustaining life by providing security that would otherwise be absent.

- ***What makes Mary's Meals school feeding methods different from those of many other organisations?***

Our vision is based on a long term view, and our supporters appreciate this. We believe that the funding for many other school feeding programmes is stilted by a misconception that, once a crisis goes away, the benefits of school feeding disappear too. School feeding programmes, just like basic healthcare programmes, are not intrinsically an emergency measure. The confusion has arisen because of the emergency nature of many food appeals, which stress the temporary need to act

immediately, leading to an ebb and flow of funding resources from the public as it responds to appeals. Most organisations carrying out school feeding cannot guarantee that they will be able to continue feeding when emergency funding dries up, and moreover many of them implement it as part of emergency response only, and so it makes sense to set up school feeding as a temporary intervention.

Although school feeding can be used as one among many tools to help tackle widespread food crises, independently of this use there is a powerful rationale for ongoing school feeding when a dire need for emergency feeding has receded. Indeed, in developed countries, we make sure that our children all receive a meal at school. However, all too often, the abatement of crisis leads to the withdrawal of school feeding, and communities are left weakened and further susceptible to tensions and distress. Being unable to feed your children is a psychologically difficult thing to accept, especially if you are trying to recover from a crisis such as famine or war, which can tear apart social fabrics and leave bereavement, trauma and physical ill health in its wake. Many of these things can take considerable time to recover from, and when safety nets are removed, the situation can easily become desperate or hopeless.

So, although much school feeding is implemented on an emergency basis, especially because schools are a natural safe gathering point for children and the community, we believe strongly that this temporary approach is not appropriate for the poorest children whom Mary's Meals aims to reach. Certainly it will not help in the powerful way that is possible and necessary to have a significant impact on child hunger and illiteracy. It will remain that for many of the poorest households, it is a routine fact that the poorest children go to school hungry – whether in times of general plenty or scarcity – or else, because of hunger, many children fail to attend school at all. Since research has shown that a daily school meal is a powerful tool to prevent this from happening, it is worth investing now to eradicate the problem altogether. For Mary's Meals, this means accepting that commitment to solving the problem will work: trying to withdraw as soon as possible after an emergency won't have the same effects.

- ***What strategies is Mary's Meals taking in order to ensure that its commitment to these children will continue?***

It is vital to us that we spread our fundraising over a number of different areas, so that we are not tied to one source of funding which might dry up and force us to withdraw school feeding. Therefore, although we are open to accepting grants from grant-giving bodies, we do not rely on them to achieve our work. On the contrary, Mary's Meals relies on the work of many hundreds of volunteers in the UK who work in our charity shops, warehouses and head office and occasionally offer their expertise to work overseas.

This movement is beginning to spread across the world, with links between many different donor and recipient countries. Mary's Meals now has a broad and diverse funding base, with support groups for Mary's Meals springing up across Europe, North America and Australia.

A) Practical Methods and Costs of Mary's Meals

- ***What about younger children – don't they deserve to be fed just as much as the primary aged children do?***

Yes, this is why Mary's Meals also supports nursery daycare centres in a number of countries where the need is great. These centres care for the poorest and most vulnerable children completely for free, and relieve some of the pressures there can be on families, particularly child-headed families. In many instances, child heads of the household will take their younger siblings to the nursery daycare centres before heading to school, where they receive Mary's Meals themselves. These children are enabled to go to school in a situation that would otherwise make it impossible: due to the daycare centres, they can be assured that their younger siblings are receiving the care, attention and nutrition they need, as well as being prepared to go to primary school when they reach the age of five.

- ***What happens to the children on school holidays – aren't they vulnerable to hunger then, too?***

In the poorest areas there are special programmes carried out by Mary's Meals during school holidays, to ensure that children may continue to be fed if there is no other food available. If volunteers are willing to continue to cook even when school is not open, Mary's Meals recognises that this is a sign of particular need in that area, and we will continue to provide food for them to cook, as long as this situation exists. The nursery daycare centres feed children all year round, six days a week.

- ***What happens to children after they leave primary school?***

This differs from country to country. Malawi, like many African countries, does not provide free secondary education. Only about one quarter of the population of Malawi's children have the opportunity to go to secondary school due to the places available and the number of teachers trained to teach at that level. There are some places available through government-sponsored placements, but not enough to meet the huge need of those who cannot pay tuition fees in the country. These limited places are secured through academic merit.

Although ideally it would be best that a free secondary education was readily available, ensuring that universal primary education is a reality is more fundamental than secondary education as a foundation for benefits to the nation. The effect per early year of schooling is more dramatic than additional years after primary school, and so it remains a priority to concentrate on primary education.

Many of the children who receive Mary's Meals are now securing scholarships for placements in secondary schools in Malawi – this is one of the most significant reported changes in the schools where Mary's Meals has been introduced. It is safe to say that Mary's Meals has been instrumental in making this happen, because many schools have changed from having no children pass the examinations for secondary school, to 40 or 50 children winning scholarships in the year when Mary's Meals was introduced.

- ***Isn't it misleading to emphasise how cheaply a child can be fed a single meal every school day in a place like Malawi – doesn't it cut corners and leave a lot unanswered?***

The programme is simply very efficient, and provides a decent lunch that is healthy and nutritious. As mentioned above, the basic cost of food used for the daily lunch may be very cheap by British standards, but given the levels of poverty in Malawi, it remains expensive for local people and effectively out of their reach. This fact means that money donated from the UK can be used extremely efficiently, because it can go so much further in Malawi in the purchase of basic foodstuffs. The lunch is simple but nutritious, just what a child needs to sustain them for a school day. It is an easy form of food for the volunteers to prepare and serve because it is in the form of porridge, and no complicated process is necessary. All of these factors lead to the minimisation of expense without compromising quality or cutting corners.

The contributions of volunteers are invaluable, because through the co-operation and ownership of the local community, it is not necessary for cooks to be employed on a long-term basis. This would increase the cost of the programme because many cooks are required on a daily basis; however, since the volunteer networks are already efficient and reliable in performing this job, the programme is delivered efficiently.

Although employing cooks would mean that we were supporting the livelihood of those employed and their families, it would affect the rapid spread of Mary's Meals to new schools and slow it down. The funds we have been donated would not stretch so efficiently to meet as many children as we can reach at present, and we would not be able to respond to as many of the requests for school feeding that we receive.

- ***What kind of meals do children receive, and does it have REAL nutritional value for them?***

Likuni Phala is a porridge specially designed by nutritionists, consisting of maize flour and ground soy beans, fortified with vitamins and minerals, with a small amount of sugar. Chosen for its good nutritional value, popularity and ease of preparation, a large mug is enough to help a child through the day. It is too expensive for most Malawians to afford on a regular basis, so it is something that would remain outside the reach of most families.

- ***Is it just a marketing device to say that a child can be fed for £6.15, or is this accurate?***

It is perfectly accurate. Buying and cooking in bulk reduces the cost, and we have no expensive overheads either at the Mary's Meals Malawi office, or at Mary's meals Scotland. The contributions of PTA volunteers means that we can reach larger numbers of children.

There is an additional cost for capital (to build the kitchen and storeroom and buy utensils and stoves), usually about £3 per child on average. However, this cost disappears as soon as the feeding programme has started, and often schools in developed countries or local businesses have sponsored the building of kitchens or the provision of materials. The running cost of the programme (providing the Likuni Phala every single school day for a year) remains approximately £6.15 per annum per child.

- ***How much of the money raised by donors goes on administration costs?***

Mary's Meals believes wholeheartedly in the importance of good stewardship of the resources entrusted to us. We are determined to keep our running costs low.

At the end of 2008, our use of donations was broken down as follows:

- Governance Costs: 1%
- Awareness Raising: 2%
- Fundraising: 5%
- Overseas Project Expenditure and Value of Aid Delivered: 92%

A) Poverty in General

- ***Why does there seem to be little progress in tackling poverty worldwide, and why should donors still give money to charities like Mary's Meals?***

There have been both triumphs and set-backs in the fight against poverty. Some of the triumphs are due to the tremendous achievements of education, medicine and science, and above all, the determination and vision of those who have pushed for change and improvement in people's quality of life. Some set-backs have been tragic, such as the emergence of the AIDS virus. But very often, what appears as a set-back (ie, the 'failure' to eradicate child hunger) is not a set-back at all, only a statement of the present reality, which should make us see urgently the need for continued commitment to solving the problem.

In Europe, for instance, in the 1800s, the average income of a European was 90% of the average income in Africa, and life expectancy in western Europe was only 40 years old. It took many years for Britain to achieve universal primary education in reality, starting in the 1800s. It took great commitment and determination from all parties to achieve it - an optimistic and pro-active approach, that must also be applied to poor countries rather than a pessimistic outlook. The fact that economic equality has not been achieved in the world is due to serious obstacles such as hunger and want, which present barriers to education, and it is these same obstacles which Mary's Meals aims to help remove.

The many aspects of poverty that the world has already overcome are worth celebrating, and we are inspired by the truth of these possibilities to continue the fight to tackle poverty.

- ***Why should we think we have any responsibility towards children on the other side of the world?***

The world has in many ways become a truly global society, and what affects one part of the world also affects other people in very distant areas. This has always been a reality – for instance, we are witnessing these interconnectedness in a very disturbing way through climate change. Other examples of the connections between nations are international trade and human rights.

Poverty in one group of people impoverishes the whole world – firstly, because it prevents creativity and inventiveness from blossoming; secondly, because it prevents all types of people communicating about problems that require co-operation to solve, and which everyone globally will be able to benefit from in some way; thirdly, it also creates conditions for social unrest.

When we resist giving anything back to people in need, even if they may seem very distant from us, we ignore the fact that our society is closely involved with and benefits from sweatshop industries, unfair terms of trade, and many other great inequalities which swing the balance of riches in our favour, and keep entire communities and their dependents in poverty. We have a moral obligation to assist the most vulnerable, especially if we cannot immediately change other unfair

systems as soon as we would like. There is no reason for a child to suffer hunger because wider issues keeping their family in poverty have not yet been resolved.

- ***What about poverty and needs in Britain – doesn't charity begin at home?***

There is undoubtedly serious poverty that still exists in Britain today. Nonetheless, Britain is also one of the richest countries in the world, and our government can afford to set up safety nets for the poorest in our society. In countries where poverty is the rule rather than the exception, it is far more difficult to generate funds for safety nets, even in emergencies. It should indeed come as a shock that poverty still exists so near to home in Britain: but this does not mean that the life-threatening and chronic poverty overseas can be dismissed.

There are important differences between the options open to someone in poverty in Britain, and someone in poverty in a country like Malawi. For decades, every child in Britain has enjoyed the chance to go to school, and many additional schemes are in place to ensure that no child misses out on this opportunity. One of these schemes still existing in Britain is free school dinners for children whose parents are in a low-income bracket. Although we are a much richer country, there would be no rationale for abolishing this scheme so long as child hunger because of poverty is even a slight possibility in Britain. This idea of free school dinners for the most disadvantaged is exactly what we are proposing to achieve in countries like Malawi – if it has been viewed as essential to alleviate child poverty in Britain, it is even more essential to fight child poverty in extremely poor countries, where hunger and malnutrition are far greater dangers.

- ***Doesn't the world have more urgent priorities than universal education to concentrate on, such as tackling climate change, preventing deadly diseases, or creating world peace?***

While the problems of the world are affected and often deepened by our behaviour today, our understanding and ability to act wisely is assisted by our education. Since education creates a strong base for any sort of action, it is an extremely important component of any plan for change. On the other hand, failing to ensure that universal primary education is achieved means that plans to effect change will not filter down to everyone, and not everyone will be able to include their knowledge, insight or effort in any attempt to tackle world issues. This situation will jeopardise the achievement of any goal, whether it is the eradication of disease, preventing deforestation, creating a stable and lasting peace in a war-zone, or the enjoyment of gainful and dignified employment.

- ***Is there much hope that Mary's Meals can make a difference, or is it just another scheme destined to fade away?***

We can confidently say that the idea of feeding hungry children in school is not a fad or a trend, but a simple and straightforward way of making a difference, both in the short term and the long term. Although focuses in the field of international development are prone to change, meaning that ideas like school feeding have often fallen out of the limelight, the benefits of such programmes remain exactly the same whether they are currently favourite ideas or not. We believe that the best thing we can do in order to see results is to remain loyal to achieving a steady decrease in child hunger and an increase in enrolment, attendance and achievement at school.

This tactic will gradually help the world reach its long-standing goal of universal primary education.

Furthermore, to give perspective to what we are trying to achieve: the Malawian Government has estimated that a universal programme of school feeding across the whole of Malawi would cost approximately £135 million per year, to reach over 3.5 million school children. This might seem like a lot of money, but given the fact that it could be a powerful force to help to turn the tide of poverty in an entire country, it is very little indeed. To further put things into context, £16 million is a tiny sum compared to the massive £1.5 trillion budget of the USA for 2007, of which almost £350 billion was allocated for new military spending, most of which went to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6332555.stm>). If a tiny fraction of these sums could help raise a whole nation out of poverty, it makes no sense to claim that it is 'too expensive'.

Mary's Meals can make a great difference, but it remains wholly dependent on the motivation and will of all those who want to achieve these goals together, whether as volunteers in Malawi, or as supporters in Britain and Europe, and other countries across the world.

- ***What might be Mary's Meals contribution to making poverty history?***

There are many contributions we can make! First of all, we can help to make good on the world's decades-old promises to end illiteracy and hunger. Furthermore, the more widespread school feeding becomes, the better chance we have of helping other organisations end child labour, ill-health, infant mortality and early marriage and childbearing – because a primary education helps decrease all of these indicators of poverty.

These types of problems urgently need to be tackled, otherwise poverty cannot be history. The contribution of Mary's Meals can be dramatic, because it is simple, straightforward, and extremely beneficial.



Mary's Meals

A simple solution to world hunger

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