

mary's
meals

a simple solution
to world hunger

Excerpts from The Shed That Fed A Million Children

by Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow



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Introduction

This resource includes short excerpts from the bestselling book 'The Shed That Fed A Million Children', written by Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, founder of Mary's Meals. Through these stories, you can travel with Magnus from the Highlands of Scotland to Malawi and Liberia and meet some of the people who inspired Mary's Meals' work.

This resource can help improve literacy skills across all areas including speaking, listening, reading, writing and comprehension.

Read each passage to gain an understanding of international issues and the amazing story of Mary's Meals. Discussion questions can be found alongside each passage.

We hope you enjoy this resource!

Notes for teachers and parents

This pack contains excerpts from The Shed That Fed A Million Children and associated questions.

- Why not read each passage aloud and the work through the questions together?
- Can you have a quiz based on the excerpts?
- Or draw a picture based on a scene from the book?
- Tag us on social media @marysmeals and let us know how your pupils or children get on.

The information and figures in the excerpts from The Shed That Fed A Million Children were correct when the book was published in 2015.

Our movement has grown since then and we are reaching even more children with Mary's Meals. You can find out more at marysmeals.org.uk



Magnus meeting children in Haiti.



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Where to begin?

(page 141 – 142)

Magnus remembers receiving school meals at his small primary school in the Scottish Highlands and talks about the millions of children around the world who are hungry and unable to attend school.

Questions

1. What is the link between food and learning?
2. Do you remember a time when you couldn't do something because you were hungry?
3. Can you think about some of the reasons why so many impoverished children remain out of school or unable to learn?
4. Look up the words highlighted in blue and discuss or write down the definition.

Of course the idea of serving meals in school is hardly original. Most school children take it for granted they will eat each day. I certainly did. Each morning in our little primary school in the Scottish Highlands, a sense of anticipation built as a van carrying steel containers of food, cooked at the bigger school at the other end of the loch, arrived at our gates. At least I think that is where it came from – it was always a bit of a mystery to me. We would carry them inside, guessing what might be in them. To find that the bigger containers held steaming meatballs and mashed potatoes made it a good day, although that was a short-lived feeling if the smaller lids were then opened to reveal rhubarb crumble. But I cannot ever remember going through a school day without eating, or even contemplating such a thing. School meals are accepted as essential across the developed world, whether they are funded by governments or by parents handing over 'dinner money'. In fact, globally, around 368 million children are fed daily at school, but while nearly every child benefits in this way in the world's richest countries, only around 20 per cent of children in the developing world are provided school meals, with the UN's World Food Programme feeding nearly 15 million of them. Meanwhile 57 million **impoverished** children remain out of school, while 66 million more attend the classroom hungry and unable to learn properly.

The more we talked and thought about Mary's Meals, the more the beauty of this idea captured Ruth and me. The board and all those involved in Scottish International Relief back home were immediately supportive of the proposal to start this new campaign. We decided to set up a branch of Scottish International Relief in Malawi to begin this work there (as well as the various other projects we were by now committed to in that country). Gay Russell did a huge amount of work to get the organisation set up in the right way, roping in a friend in Blantyre who was a lawyer, and before long she joined Tony Smith and me as the first Trustees of the new Malawi organisation. Meanwhile we began fundraising for our new Mary's Meals campaign.

We all agreed that the vision of Mary's Meals should be for every child to receive a daily meal in their place of education. Clearly there was a lot of work ahead of us. We just had to decide where to begin.





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meals

Edward

(page 136 – 140)

Magnus recalls meeting with 14-year-old Edward, an encounter that inspired the beginning of Mary's Meals.

Questions

1. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
2. How do your hopes and dreams contrast with Edward's?
3. Imagine you were not able to read or write, how would that restrict you in your daily life? How might this make you feel?
4. Look up the words highlighted in blue and discuss or write down the definition.

A couple of hours' drive from Namitembo, along dirt track roads through dry fields, is the parish of Balaka. On arrival here the Italian priests led me to a church which we entered through a side door. I was taken completely by surprise to find myself on the altar, staring down on 550 young children sitting silently in rows. Every one of them was an orphan. Ten years previously the priests here had decided to find sponsors in Italy to support the ten orphans they knew of in their parish. They didn't intend to do any more than that as they saw no further need. Now there were 8,000 orphans in their parish with the number growing every day. And incredibly, here, and all over Malawi, nearly all of those children orphaned by AIDS were cared for by members of their extended families. Street children and orphanages were not yet known in Malawi. I wondered how different our response in the West might be if we were faced with a disaster that resulted in hundreds of thousands of orphans.

Father Gamba, a young friendly priest, then asked me if I would like to accompany him to the home of one of his parishioners, who was near death. Thus it was I came to meet that family whose picture remains on the wall above my desk: Emma surrounded by her six children, including fourteen-year-old Edward, who, when I asked him about his hopes in life, gave me an answer I will never forget. 'I would like to have enough food to eat and I would like to be able to go to school one day' had been his stark, shocking reply to my question.

The extent of the **ambitions** of that fourteen-year-old boy, spoken as if they were a daring dream, shook me for a few reasons. The greatest of these was a conversation I had been having with Tony Smith, the man from England who had reintroduced us to Gay. He continued to support the work to build the cross, which was now evolving into a more ambitious project which would eventually see the building of an exact replica of the church in Medjugorje and the placing of identical Stations of the Cross up Michiru Mountain. His stays at Gay's house overlapped with my own and he had been talking to me about something that happened to him about two years previously.

He had been staying at Gay's house and feeling depressed at the suffering he saw in Malawi, especially that endured by hungry children. One evening, back at Gay's, he turned on the TV and found himself watching a speech made by the American Senator George McGovern in which he stated, with some passion, that if America decided to fund the provision of one daily meal in a place of education for every child in the world's poorest countries it would act like a 'Marshall Plan' that would lift the developing world out of poverty. Tony said when he heard this speech he was inspired with the thought that if someone took that concept, gave it to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and called it Mary's Meals, then it would actually happen. He had talked to Gay about this at the time and discussed the idea of beginning such a programme in Malawi. However, the famine situation then began to unfold in Malawi and the funds he sent to Gay under the name of 'Mary's Meals' were instead used for desperately needed emergency food distribution in an area called Chipini, through some nuns we had now met and were also supporting.

So much of our experience over the last twenty years came together within this one simple concept. Our devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and our surprising encounter with her in Bosnia-Herzegovina as teenagers, the numerous meetings with impoverished children in the years since who were unable to go to school because of **poverty** and hunger, the words I had just heard Edward speak, and a growing recognition that the problems faced by the world's poorest communities would only ever be overcome by people who were healthy and who had, at least, a basic education. The promise of a meal could enable those children who worked for their daily bread now to attend class instead, and would encourage parents to

send their children to school rather than keeping them at home to help. We had already seen this happen in a very small way in our project begun a couple of years earlier in Targu Mures for the Roma children.

Edward was certainly not alone in missing class. Around 30 per cent of the children in Malawi of primary-school age were not enrolled in school, despite the fact there were free school places for all. The need to find food, grow food, do paid casual work, care for dying parents and younger siblings was keeping children out of the classroom. Even if they did enrol, all too often they were unable to concentrate and learn because of their hunger, or their attendance rates were dismal because of their own illnesses. Hungry, [malnourished](#) children cannot be good students and many, like Edward, had never even had the chance to try.

Over a third of children who die in the world each year do so because of hunger-related causes. Hunger and malnutrition remain, in the twenty-first century, the biggest global health threat, causing more deaths than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis put together.

Hunger is caused by poverty and poverty is caused by hunger. People suffer chronic hunger not because there is no food, but because they cannot afford to buy it. The world produces considerably more than enough food for everyone. Even in that dire famine situation, Edward, if he'd had money, could have travelled into town and bought his family food. But he had no money and so they starved.

Chronically hungry children cannot develop physically and mentally, nor can they learn at school, and for both these reasons they are deprived of the ability to work productively and support their families as adults. They cannot live the independent dignified life that every person craves. In the developing world, 43 per cent of children are [stunted](#). They will, for the rest of their lives, be smaller in stature than they should have been (and those lives might be very short given that it is estimated that around 18,000 children die of hunger-related causes every day), while 775 million [illiterate](#) adults face an almost impossible struggle to earn enough to survive.

The first thing to do for the hungry child is to give them food. Every parent, every person, knows that. But it is clear that the gift of even a basic education is essential too, if chronic hunger is to be truly [vanquished](#). How can people learn how to irrigate their fields, make fertilizer or diversify their crops if they cannot read or write? How can they pursue other ways to make a living and create wealth beyond growing what they eat? How can illiterate people hold their governments to account? How can they defend themselves against [corruption](#)? Or combat the spread of HIV/AIDS? How can other pressing health needs be addressed without first ensuring the growing child has enough to eat?

Thus, the mission of Mary's Meals, to provide one good meal every day in a place of education, for hungry impoverished children, was launched by Edward's words.

Likuni phala

(page 144 – 147)

An account of the first school feeding by Mary's Meals in two schools in Malawi.

Questions

1. Why do you think it is important that the Mary's Meals programme is 'owned' by the local community?
2. What are the benefits of purchasing local produce for the meals?
3. What can you do to help people in need?
4. Look up the words highlighted in blue and discuss or write down the definition.

From the outset we were convinced that Mary's Meals could only be effective and long-lasting, if the local community 'owned it'. We felt strongly that each school community needed to believe in this project and have a desire to support it at least as much as us. We wanted to avoid, at all costs, the mistake of imposing an idea on people; rather, we wanted it to be theirs more than ours. This would require a genuine respectful partnership in which the local community would give what they could to enable the provision of daily meals to their children, while we would support by providing the food and other required assistance that they were unable to afford. Specifically, this concept would depend on local volunteers making a commitment to organize and carry out the daily work of cooking and serving the food. We were determined to ensure this was not seen as another emergency feeding project, but a very specific, community-owned intervention aimed at schoolchildren and linked always to education. At Chilomoni, it became clear that the Parent Teachers' Association (PTA) was the appropriate local body through which to organize. Following some community meetings at which a huge desire and enthusiasm for the Mary's Meals project was amply demonstrated, the PTA agreed to take responsibility for organizing a rota of parents and grandparents who would take their turn in giving up a morning to prepare the meals.

Another thing we felt very strongly about was that, whenever possible, the food we provided should be locally grown rather than imported. We wanted to support the economy of the country and the local farmers at every opportunity. In Malawi there was an extremely popular porridge for children called Likuni Phala ('Likuni' being the name of the place where the dish had been carefully formulated for growing children by some pioneering nuns several years earlier, while 'Phala' simply means porridge). It consists of maize, soya and sugar, and is fortified with **vitamins** and minerals. It has become the dish of choice for Malawian children and their families. Gay knew a company who manufactured Likuni Phala, by buying the raw ingredients from smallholder farmers all over Malawi and processing them into a ready-mix that simply required cooking in boiling water before serving. The choice of this, as the food we could buy and serve, was a very straightforward one. The ingredients – aside from some of the added **vitamins**, which came from South Africa – were all grown within Malawi and the product was readily available, easy to transport and simple to cook. It was also wonderfully inexpensive!

During January 2003, the first Mary's Meals were cooked and served at Chilomoni. That same week exactly the same thing was happening for the first time in those remote and hungry villages in Chipini. There, the impressive Medical Missionaries of Mary sisters had organized the school feeding programme, based on exactly the same model of local volunteers cooking Likuni Phala, for seven small primary schools. The rates of child malnutrition were particularly high there, and many children did not attend school because of hunger and poverty. And so it was that Mary's Meals began in an urban and rural setting simultaneously.

My first visit to Chipini after the start of Mary's Meals was, sadly, during another famine, for in 2003 food shortages here were more acute than ever. At Chinyazi primary school, skinny children queued quietly for their Mary's Meals. Far too quietly. Many of the children walked past me, the white man with the camera, as if I wasn't there: none of the usual laughing and **jostling** to get in the picture. It was already noon and they were more interested in eating for the first time that day. Little groups of children sat down in the dust and silently ate their porridge. For most of them this would be their only meal of the day. Near the school, outside a mud hut, I saw a 'gogo' (grandmother) sitting with her youngest grandchildren and I paid her a visit. She explained that her daughter, the children's mother, had died and that she was the children's sole carer. She told me in despairing tones that there was now no maize she could

afford to buy in this whole area. Later on, her two older grandchildren, Allieta and Kondwande, arrived back from school carrying their grubby jotters and empty mugs (in which they had been served their Mary's Meals). They had more energy now. They laughed when they saw me at their home and proudly showed Granny their schoolwork. They explained that the daily porridge was enabling them to attend school for the first time.

Within a few months of serving Mary's Meals a few things became obvious. First of all it was plain to see that this was not just a nice idea. It was something that would actually work. The schools began to report that, after the introduction of the daily meals, children whose attendance rates had previously been very poor, because of illness and hunger, were now attending every day. They also began to see significant increases in [enrolment](#). Children who had never been to school were coming for the first time, sent by parents who were assured their children would now eat every day and were therefore happy to give up the help they might have been providing in the fields and at home.



Child 31

(page 242 – 247)

Some background to the film **Child 31** and accounts of the filming process and release. Why not [watch the film](#) before reading this excerpt?

Questions

1. What are the benefits of using film to convey a message?
2. How did the team's actions change Muski's future?
3. It currently costs Mary's Meals £19.15 to feed a child for a full school year. What have you bought recently that cost £19.15 or more?
4. Look up the words highlighted in blue and discuss or write

I began speaking to Ana about an opportunity we had to make an amazing film about Mary's Meals. For some time I had been a fan of a film-making company in Brooklyn called Grassroots. Ruth and I had watched one of their films a couple of years previously and commented that they would be the perfect people to make a film about Mary's Meals one day. I had almost forgotten about them until Patty, who worked in our New Jersey office, asked me at the end of a call one day if she could finish work early to go and do an interview with an organisation called Grassroots, who were making a film on a different topic.

'Absolutely!' I said. 'As long as you mention Mary's Meals to them! I have always wanted them to make a film about our work.'

To my amazement Patty came back to say that Grassroots already knew about our work and would love to make a documentary about Mary's Meals. I began talking to them and realized that they were very serious indeed about this, but I also learnt that making such a film was not cheap and not something the Mary's Meals low-cost approach could support. When I mentioned it to Ana and Philippe they immediately saw this as a wonderful way to help us tell the story of Mary's Meals to a much bigger audience and they offered to fund the film.

So, a few weeks after those initial chats, I found myself with the Grassroots film crew on a whirlwind tour of Malawi, Kenya and India. In each of those places we spent time with children whose lives were being changed by Mary's Meals. We wanted their stories to be the basis of the film. We did a lot of hard work to plan it all, setting up places to film and people to meet, but in the end the most amazing parts of the film were things we could never have set up.

In Eldoret, Kenya, we had organized to film in a rubbish dump where many children spent their days scavenging for items to sell to recyclers, sniffing glue to stave off the pain of hunger. We were providing school meals in Eldoret and could see this was helping many children leave the streets and go to school for the first time. We arrived at 5 a.m. at the dump and began filming. As well as children there were many adults, some obviously high on glue, and many bore wounds on their faces and limbs. It was a frightening place. As they filmed, a crowd surrounded them – some friendly, others not. At one point Cliff, one of the crew, called over to me.

'Magnus, there is a small boy here you should meet.'

He led over a little boy called Muski, perhaps eight years old, who was saying over and over again, 'I want to go to school. I want to go to school ...'

I talked to our Kenyan colleagues, asking their advice about the best thing to do.

'Well, we can take him to a school here and he will receive Mary's Meals,' said Abel, with his hand on the boy's shoulder, 'but we really need to find somewhere for him to live.'

'There is a children's home on the other side of the city,' said Charles. 'Who knows, they might be able to take him in.'

Before long we were driving across the city with Muski and found the home, with a neat, brightly painted play area outside. A couple of us went in and introduced ourselves. When the people who ran the home learnt we were from Mary's Meals they became very **animated**.

'Oh, you are from Mary's Meals! We have always wanted to meet someone from Mary's Meals. You have started providing meals in the school across the street from us. All the children who live with us here go there and so are now eating every day at school, thank God! We want to thank you with all our hearts!'

I felt this was a really good moment to tell them about the little boy in the car outside.

‘Yes, we have space. We can take him – we are happy to!’

Thus it was that Muski’s life was **transformed** in front of our eyes. I couldn’t believe it when I glanced at my watch and noticed it was still only 10 a.m. After Abel and Charles had sorted out arrangements at the home, and ensured we could check up on his **welfare**, we invited Muski to hang out with us for the day as we continued to film at schools in the area.

By the end of the morning he was behind the camera. I even saw him laugh for the first time. By midday, we realized we had been working for eight hours without eating and called in at a restaurant by the roadside. It happened to be rather formal with white tablecloths and suited waiters who looked distinctly unimpressed as we walked in with the dirty little boy in rags, who did not smell at all good. We took him to the bathroom and scrubbed him as best we could before sitting down to some chicken and chips. At one point during lunch one of us asked Muski when his birthday was. Of course he didn’t know.

‘Well, today is your birthday!’ we all told him together.

The film that Grassroots produced, *Child 31*, is a wonderful, moving representation of Mary’s Meals. It has become the most effective tool I have ever had to help us tell the story and explain what Mary’s Meals really is. We encouraged supporters all over the world to organize screenings of *Child 31* and the response was amazing. Over 1,300 people showed up for the ‘premiere’ at our Open Day in Glasgow. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who had by then been appointed United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, attended the event and introduced the film. I had got to know him a little and was struck by his genuine long-held passion to help **eradicate** extreme poverty. As we chatted before going on stage in Glasgow, he asked me to tell him more about the work of Mary’s Meals. Afterwards he made an extremely powerful speech, ending it by saying:

‘Ensuring every child has the opportunity to go to school and learn is a long-standing passion of mine. Education breaks the cycle of poverty and unlocks better health and job prospects.

‘As I travel throughout the world on this mission, as the UN Envoy for Global Education, I don’t need a calling card. I will just leave a copy of *Child 31* and show what can be done to encourage children into education.’

Over 600 screenings of the film, which we had subtitled in seven languages, were organized in many different countries. In many European countries, as well as the USA, Canada, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Liberia, Malawi and India, people gathered to watch the film in all sorts of venues – cinemas, palaces, sitting rooms, schools and universities – while in several countries the film was broadcast on TV. I had hoped this film would allow me to cut down on travelling to give talks, but that was naive – the initial screenings provided opportunities to speak to many new audiences. Given how often I watched the film in venues far from home, the fact that three of my own children – Bethany, Toby and Anna – appear fleetingly in the film was a special little treat for me at times. Grassroots had filmed at a fundraising event in our local Dalmally primary school and as there are only about forty children in the school, it is not surprising my children and their friends appeared in the final edit. Often, at the part when Anna, among a crowd of classmates, smiles and waves at the camera, I would surprise the person beside me in the audience by nudging them and saying proudly, ‘That’s my daughter by the way!’

When the film was aired on a national TV station in Croatia their website crashed as it became inundated with people wishing to donate, and over the following months Mary’s Meals doubled its income in that country. Everywhere our work grew like never before because of *Child 31*, and to this day it continues to move thousands of people to help. Various celebrities, including Celine Dion, provided sincere video endorsements after watching the film. Annie Lennox said:

If one fact should resonate in our minds after viewing *Child 31*, it might be that the average cost of a lunch in the United States could feed a child in a developing country for an entire year. Mary’s Meals feeds over half a million children every single day, encouraging them to attend school and receive an essential education at the same time. It’s not rocket science and it really works.

Only just begun

(page 303 – 304)

A reflection on how far Mary's Meals has come and how much more work is left to do.

Questions

1. What is your response to the fact that the cost of large house in London could feed all the hungry children in Malawi?
2. If you had been the one to sell the diamond how would you use the money?
3. What small changes could you make in your life to share a little of what you have with others?
4. Look up the words highlighted in blue and discuss or write

It is summer and the Orchy has grown ponderous and narrow and warm enough for my kids to swim in her. I saw them through my shed window earlier, trotting down the farm track with their towels and lunchboxes, heading for the pool at Corryghoil. For a moment I was tempted to join them but there are some things I need to do.

Over a million children are now eating Mary's Meals every school day in over 1,200 schools. New pictures drawn by some of them are on my wall. The extraordinary ways in which all this has grown and developed have continually surprised me and filled me with a sense of mystery and awe. It would not be true, though, to say that I never expected our work to grow so big. I have long felt that the vision of Mary's Meals is so compelling, and people of good will so numerous, that it must be fulfilled. That is why we are celebrating this landmark as 'The First Million'. The fact that there remain many more millions without daily meals, and that thousands die each day because of hunger, is a scandal that screams this mission of ours has only just begun.

When we first reached a million I asked our clever team in the Glasgow office to provide me with some information about what it would take for the rest of them to eat at school. I mean all the children of primary-school age in the developing world. But it was a mistake. The spreadsheet they sent me told me that to provide Mary's Meals to every child in Malawi, based on our current costs, would require an annual budget of £22 million. I was not able to resist typing that value into Google. I saw there was a house for sale in London with that asking price and a rare orange diamond had been recently sold for the same amount. I am not sure if orange diamonds are the sort they mine in Liberia, but the figures showed that actually we would only need a little more than half the value of that diamond to feed all of the primary-school children in that nation each year.

I notice, too, that the annual whisky sales from Scotland are worth a similar total to the sum needed to feed all the primary-school children in the whole of Africa who are currently without meals at school. But then I close the spreadsheet, deciding that this is not a particularly good use of my time. I know already that our vision is **eminently** achievable. It would require the world's governments and international bodies to devote only a tiny fraction of the resources at their disposal to make this happen and thereby transform the future of the world's poorest nations. And it would require all of us to share only a tiny fraction of our own resources in order to make it happen too. The purchaser of that house in London is not obliged to share their bread any more than I am.





School + Food = Hope

Mary's Meals sets up school feeding programmes in some of the world's poorest communities to attract chronically hungry children into the classroom, where they can gain an education that provides an escape from poverty.

Our vision is that every child receives one daily meal in their place of education and that all those who have more than they need, share with those who lack even the most basic of things.

It costs just £19.15 to feed a child for a whole school year with Mary's Meals.

To find out more about how we're keeping our promise to the children who rely on Mary's Meals, please visit marysmeals.org.uk

