

European Food Security Group

Position Paper on School Feeding Programmes

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European Emergency Food Security Group (EEFSG)¹

Rationale:

With over 850 million people under-nourished in the world, hunger remains a major problem that is not being adequately addressed. At the same time, 115 million children of primary school age are out of school and are thus disadvantaged in terms of future opportunities and potential in life. School feeding programmes have been implemented in many countries over several decades in an attempt to improve the health, growth, educational performance and attendance of school age children. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these programmes remains questionable, and there is a need to ensure that aid resources available are used most efficiently.

In 2000, the United Nation's humanitarian food agency – the World Food Programme (WFP) - launched a global campaign urging national governments to invest in school feeding programmes. Almost simultaneously, the US government made a commitment of \$ 300 million for ensuring a meal for children at school. The United States' McGovern-Dole International Food for Education (FFE) programme was authorised by Congress in the 2002 Farm Bill to “provide meals to millions of children in poor countries as part of their education”, and released additional funds for this purpose. This was closely followed by the inclusion of school feeding as a specific intervention in the action plans of the G8 nations and NEPAD² in 2002.

Over the years, WFP's outreach on school feeding has progressively increased from 12.3 million children in 54 countries in 2000 to 16.6 million children in 72 countries in 2004. WFP aims to further increase the coverage of its food for education programmes to 50 million children by the end of 2007. Clearly, UN bilateral and multilateral donors see a value in investing in school feeding programmes as a means of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on primary education and hunger reduction and this is reflected in their increased support for school feeding programmes.

¹ The EEFSG is a sub-group of EuronAid/Concord's European Food Security Group (EFSG). Members include Action Contre la Faim, Concern Worldwide, EuronAid, German Agro-Action, ICCO, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK.

² New Partnership for Africa's Development

WFP, the largest implementer of school feeding programmes provides school meals or take-home food rations to “attract hungry children to school”, believing that this will improve their nutritional status, help them to concentrate better and in the process get an education.

While the EEFSG supports the principle that all children should be attending school and should be provided with a meal as part of the education process, there are concerns about how this ideal should be achieved in practice, especially in a context of limited resources.

Concerns of the EEFSG:

1. School feeding programmes are often undertaken without an adequate assessment to determine the causes of malnutrition or hunger among school children, the reasons for lack of attendance by some children, or the causes of poor performance. It is far from self-evident that school feeding programmes would address the underlying causes of these problems.
2. The objectives of school feeding programmes are often unclear with there being a particular lack of clarity on what the primary focus is – increased school attendance, improved performance at school, or improvement in nutritional status.
3. Without clear problem analysis or clear objectives, school feeding often becomes a stand-alone resource-driven intervention. It is highly unlikely that food alone can bring children to school, keep them there and ensure that they are well educated. If school feeding is to go ahead, it needs to be seen as only one possible option amongst a range of complementary interventions and national policies required to address either educational attendance and attainment or nutrition objectives.
4. Although school feeding programmes have in the past resulted in increased school attendance levels, there is only circumstantial evidence to indicate that they have improved nutritional status significantly, and the evidence of their impact on educational attainment is weak. Hence the overall effectiveness of school feeding programmes remains an unresolved issue.
5. School feeding programmes often fail to reach the poorest children in communities, including those out of school or engaged in child labour. For those in work, a school meal is not a large enough incentive to compensate for the extra direct costs of education and the opportunity costs of lost income or domestic work.
6. School feeding programmes – including most pre-school programmes - also fail to reach children under the age of three; the period when irreversible chronic malnutrition is most likely to occur³.

³ Conclusive evidence is still missing, but most current research suggests that chronic malnutrition among children under 3 years old is likely to cause irreversible growth retardations.

7. Delivery of food aid to schools is viewed by some actors as an appropriate alternative to emergency food distribution, and hence resources may be diverted from general ration programmes to school feeding in some contexts. It is most unlikely that school feeding is the best use of limited resources for addressing food insecurity and malnutrition in many contexts.

Common position: The EESFG recognises the fact that school age children suffer from high levels of malnutrition in many countries of the world. These are also the children who already are, or will become the economically active members of society and would contribute to the health and nutritional gains of the next generation of children. School feeding programmes may in some contexts offer part of the solution to the complexities of poverty.

1. The EEFSG is committed to promoting sustainable and cost effective solutions to food insecurity and malnutrition based on sound analysis of the causes. Therefore an assessment of the causes of the problem(s) to be addressed must be carried out to determine whether school feeding would be a useful part of the solution and, if so, the programme should have clear, realistic objectives set from the start.
2. The EEFSG believes that in a context of general food insecurity or shortage, general food or cash distribution to families, supplemented where necessary by programmes to ensure infants are reached, are likely to be a more appropriate means of preventing malnutrition⁴ and/ or addressing the economic barriers to school attendance than school feeding programmes. In such contexts school feeding may be a valuable additional feeding programme. However, school feeding should not divert resources away from general food distributions or cash transfers.
3. The EEFSG believes that where school feeding programmes are implemented, to ensure an inclusive approach that reaches the poorest, the provision of a meal should not be conditional upon a child's attendance at school (nor should the receipt of a school meal be the main objective of school attendance). As this potentially undermines objectives relating to attendance, additional measures should be undertaken to facilitate and encourage all children's attendance at school. The involvement of parents in managing the school could be a measure to raise awareness about the usefulness of school attendance.
4. The EEFSG believes that where school feeding programmes are suitable, they should be extended to pre-schools where they exist. Appropriate alternative programming should also be considered to protect the nutritional status of children under three years of age.

⁴ For example, in a situation of general household food insecurity, the provision of a school meal intended as a supplement risks in practice becoming a substitute for meals provided at home.

5. The EEFG believes that provision of school meals needs to be combined with health promotion and access to water and sanitation facilities in order to have a beneficial impact on children's health status.
6. The EEFG believes that while school feeding programmes may attract children to school, substantial investments in the quality of education will also be required in many cases for meeting educational attainment objectives. At a minimum, efforts must be made to ensure that any school feeding programme does not compromise educational quality, for example through burdening teachers with administrative/ preparatory duties, or creating untenable teacher-pupil ratios.
7. EEFG believes that school feeding programmes that are established should have sustainability as an objective from the start, and therefore should avoid reliance on short-term financing and resourcing mechanisms. Local community involvement is also essential.

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