

An introduction to Mary's Meals

PRESS RELEASE



Mary's Meals sets up and runs school feeding projects in communities where poverty and hunger prevent children from gaining an education.

We are a small charity, with around 30 staff, and we provide daily meals in school for over 459,000 children in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, feeding 10 per cent of the primary school population in Malawi alone.

Our aim is to address the immediate needs of a hungry child by providing a daily meal, and to enable that child to receive the education that can offer an escape from poverty.

History: Mary's Meals began in 1992 during the Balkan conflict, when Magnus and Fergus MacFarlane-Barrow organised a local appeal for blankets and food. They filled a jeep with aid and delivered their cargo to Medjugorje in Bosnia.

The brothers, aged 25 and 27, returned to Scotland expecting to resume work as fish farmers, but in their absence their parents' garage had been filled with more donations.

Magnus took a 'gap year', to deliver the aid for as long as it was needed and provided, and has never gone back to his old job. The donations didn't stop – they still haven't – so the project was registered as a charity, then named Scottish International Relief (SIR).

SIR's work soon extended to Romania, where it built and maintained homes for abandoned children, and Liberia, helping refugees by setting up mobile clinics. While SIR has expanded recently, it is still involved in all of its original projects.

On a visit to Malawi in 2002, Magnus met a boy whose plight led to a new focus and our main area of work today. Lying on the floor of her hut, the boy's mother was dying from AIDS, surrounded by her six children.

Magnus asked the oldest son what he hoped for in life, and he said: "to have enough to eat and go to school one day." The request struck a chord, and led to the evolution of SIR into Mary's Meals at it exists today.

Work and key projects: Mary's Meals provides a daily meal to chronically hungry children in their local schools, encouraging them to access education and opportunities for a better future.

We operate in fifteen countries, from Albania to Zambia, with our largest projects in Haiti, Liberia, and Malawi, which has become the flagship for our school feeding programme.

Through our Malawi project we believe we have developed a model for effective, cost-effective, school feeding that can be replicated across that country and in many of the poorest countries in the world, making a measurable impact in the long and short term.

Children in our Malawi projects eat likuni phala, a cheap but nutrient rich corn-soya blend, which is produced locally. A team of 11,000 local volunteers prepare the food, helping us to feed a child for just over £6 a year. Where schools do not have kitchens, we set them up, providing tools like fuel-efficient rocket stoves and a mug for each child.

Research shows that school feeding is an effective way to combat poverty. A regular meal in school ensures that attendance rises, and with appropriate nutrition, concentration and achievement improve as well. While we hope to withdraw our involvement when it is no longer needed, we envisage that to have a real impact on children's lives, our commitment may be for several generations.

A World Food Programme report, *Food for Education Works*, explains the impact of schemes like ours: "Food for education is a way of enrolling more children into school, keeping them enrolled, and enhancing their adulthood wellbeing and productivity."

In Malawi, 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 homogeneous. In these situations Mary's Meals normally feeds an entire school or institution.

In other countries, such as India, Romania, Albania, Bosnia, Ukraine and the Philippines, poverty can be localised, and certain sections of society are more likely to benefit, so the Mary's Meals scheme is tailored to help tackle a particular social problem.

Mary's Meals in India helps to overcome barriers to education faced by children from 'untouchable' castes. In Romania, Mary's Meals provide for children in the stigmatized Roma community, and in Ukraine and the Philippines, support for street children is a step on a path to school.

Our commitment to education continues in the United Kingdom, where our team of volunteer speakers visit schools to share their experiences. We encourage young people to develop their enterprise skills in our backpack and school assignment projects, and to build communication skills as trained 'animators' visiting other classes and organisations.

Notes: There are 77 million primary aged children in the world today who do not attend school, and 400 million who suffer hunger. Usually, the children who do not go to school are also hungry: evidence links the two deprivations across generations and social class.

Our enthusiasm for school feeding is because it aims to combat these problems, and thus benefits the poorest children most dramatically.

The straightforward idea has attracted the attention and support of the local community in Scotland and overseas, and this help, which we believe can be replicated further, is what ensures it is a success in practice.

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