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School Feeding Helps Unlock the Promise of the World's Youngest and Largest Generation

Reaching 3 million children with daily school meals, Mary's Meals helps create a pathway to education and opportunity.

Bloomfield, N.J. – January 21, 2026 – Ahead of International Day of Education on January 24, [Mary's Meals](#) reaffirms its commitment to reaching more children with a daily meal at school, so every young person has the chance to develop, thrive, and fulfill their potential. This is especially important as the largest generation of young people comes of age.

Today, [1.8 billion people](#) between the ages of 10 and 24 make up the largest generation of youth in history, and nearly 90% live in developing countries, according to the United Nations (U.N.). Representing about 22% of the global population, they have the potential to help address some of the world's most complex issues. But to achieve that, they must first have the basics: a daily meal and access to school.

Guaranteeing meaningful learning opportunities for every young person is essential and urgent. By 2030, the world will reach the deadline to achieve the [U.N. Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG), including No Poverty, Zero Hunger, and Quality Education. These interconnected goals cannot be accomplished without access to educational opportunities, and learning is not possible where hunger persists.

[School meals](#) play a central role in addressing these challenges. Signalling their importance, in 2023, school meals were added as an official indicator of the SDG 4: Quality Education. They improve health, increase attendance and academic engagement, and foster education, a clear path out of poverty. Yet millions of children face obstacles to schooling because of conflict, climate extremes, hunger, and poverty. It's estimated that [638 million people](#) face hunger, and [272 million children](#) are out of school.

For 24 years, school-feeding charity Mary's Meals has seen first-hand how a simple meal served at school can transform a child's life. These community-led feeding programs reach children in some of the most challenging places and contexts.

Paul McMahon, Director of Marketing and Communications at Mary's Meals, said: "A hungry stomach has no ears to listen. By feeding children in a place of learning, Mary's Meals offers a simple solution to child hunger that works." He added, "As our founder and CEO Magnus MacFarlane Barrow reminds us, 'For the poorest children, the right to food and the right to education are inseparable. School meals uphold these fundamental rights and many others too.'"

Now operating in 16 countries and providing meals for more than 3 million students in over 5,000 schools, Mary's Meals has supported the rise of a new cohort called [Generation Hope](#). These young adults have gone on to pursue further studies, start businesses, secure employment, and help strengthen their families and communities. Mary's Meals annual [Impact Reports](#) across five countries consistently show that school meals improve nutrition, growth, learning outcomes, and the well-being of local communities.

When children receive a regular daily meal and consistent access to education, they gain opportunities to socialize and expand their prospects. School meals also help promote gender equality: boys and girls receive the same chance to learn, socialize, and build meaningful connections.

In countries suffering from conflict, poverty, and hunger, school meals are lifelines. In places like [Haiti](#), they help keep students in school, nourished, and focused and [less vulnerable to gang recruitment](#). In regions where educating girls has not traditionally been prioritized, school meals give families a compelling reason to send daughters to school, offering an alternative to early marriage and restricted life prospects.

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About Mary's Meals

Now in its 24th year, Mary's Meals is a global movement that sets up school-feeding programs in some of the world's most vulnerable communities, where conflict, poverty and hunger often prevent children from gaining an education. Mary's Meals works with in-country volunteers and trusted partners to provide one daily nutritious meal in a place of learning to bring children into the classroom to receive an education. This simple solution to help end world hunger also enables children to lift themselves from the cycle of hunger and poverty.

Mary's Meals began by feeding 200 children in Malawi in 2002. Today, the organization feeds more than 3 million children every school day in over 5,000 schools in the following countries: Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Mary's Meals is part of the global School Meals Coalition, an emerging initiative of governments and partners to drive actions that can urgently reestablish, improve, and scale up food and education systems. For more information about Mary's Meals, visit marysmealsusa.org.

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