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International School Meals Day Spotlight: How One School Meal Fuels Learning and Strengthens Communities Worldwide

Bloomfield, N.J. – March 12, 2026 – Today, [Mary's Meals](#) will serve more than 3 million school meals to children living in 16 of the world's poorest countries. And tomorrow, again, more than 3 million children will receive a nutritious meal in their place of education.

It costs just 13 cents to feed one child for one day (\$25.20 for an entire school year), but we know the value of that meal is much more. For children receiving school meals, [research consistently shows](#) improved attendance, concentration, and an increased likelihood of educational progress. The benefits also stretch beyond schools to families and the wider society.

Some of the far-reaching benefits of Mary's Meals' school feeding program are evident in [Zambia](#), where Mary's Meals supports daily school meals for 605,000 children. There, Mary's Meals supports local farmers through partnerships that promote conservation and work with cooperatives comprising smallholder farmers.

Chief Programs Officer at Mary's Meals International, Erin Pratley, said, "We source maize and soya beans for our school meals in Zambia from cooperatives practicing conservation farming. This means our Zambia school feeding program boosts local production capacity, farmer incomes, and gender inclusive leadership. You can't even imagine how far 13 cents (the worldwide cost per meal) goes."

Our suppliers' traceability systems, which track from source to delivery, and continuous training of farmers further enhance supply chain reliability and sustainable agriculture in Zambia. Together, this reinforces Mary's Meals' contribution to sustainable, multi-sectoral development across agriculture and education, enhancing livelihoods and community resilience.

School meals = Gender inclusivity

The ingredients for meals served in Mary's Meals' Zambia school feeding program were supplied by over 22,000 smallholder farmers – more than half of whom were women. These smallholder farmers belonged to 16 cooperatives, nine of which were headed by females.

School meals = Building local capacity

As part of Mary's Meals' supplier partnership with COMACO in Zambia, all smallholder farmers who contribute to the school feeding program received training in conservation farming, including soil

fertility improvement, land preparation, and post-harvest handling, as well as cooperative governance and leadership development training.

School meals = Investing in the local economy

These partnerships enable Mary's Meals to purchase high-quality maize and soya beans in volumes large enough to feed more than 605,000 children every school day, while also generating income for local smallholder farmers.

In 2025, Mary's Meals delivered over 28,600 metric tons of locally procured food for our school meals globally as part of its commitment to strengthening local food systems.

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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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