

Op-Ed: School feeding programs are the place to start for Global Food Security | AgriPulse

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July 25, 2011

Op-Ed: School feeding is not just for kids

By Marshall Matz

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The world community has identified global food security as a top priority. From the Obama Administration to the G-8 to the United Nations and the World Bank, there is a new commitment to addressing this important issue.

The challenge is clearly daunting. One sixth of the world's population, a billion people, is hungry. A third of Africa is hungry. Unless bold action is taken, the problem is expected to get worse as the world's population increases from the current 6.7 billion people to 9 billion people by 2050.

According to the World Food Program, hunger now kills more people each year than malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS combined. The best estimate is that some 10,000 children a day perish due to hunger.



Students at a Nairobi school, enjoying corn soy blend (CSB) supplied by the McGovern-Dole international school nutrition program. Photo by Marshall Matz.

School feeding programs are, therefore, the place to start in the fight against hunger and are indispensable to achieving global food security. Throughout the world, we have seen that school feeding programs are the single most effective way to reach hungry children, particularly young girls, which is critical. In addition to fighting hunger, school feeding programs support education, health care and the agriculture sector.

In short, school feeding programs are fundamental to a country's economic development and global food security. We must bring school feeding to those countries that do not have programs and expand the programs where they do exist.

How do you establish the policy framework necessary to start and expand school feeding programs in developing countries? Candidly, I am hesitant to advise other countries how to develop their public policy based on my experience in America. The 47 Sub-Saharan governments, the governments of Southeast Asia and other developing countries, each have their own unique culture, tradition and political history. Further, many of your countries are still quite young. Ghana is the oldest country in Sub-Saharan Africa gaining its independence 53 years ago, in 1957. The other governments in Sub-Saharan Africa are even younger and still in the process of putting down roots and stabilizing. That is not so surprising when you stop and realize that the Civil War in the United States was fought 70 years after our Revolutionary War.

Therefore, as a frame of reference for discussing public policy let's focus more on human nature and less on any formal governmental structure. We all share a common desire when it comes to our children. We all want the best for our children and hope our children will lead a better life with more opportunity.

Public policy development, in any country, under any system, must first identify the overarching objective or purpose of the policy. So what are the goals of school feeding? Why are we committed to establishing and improving school feeding programs?

The primary goal of school feeding, of course, is to eliminate childhood hunger, to make sure children do not go hungry and live diminished lives. None of us knows which child has the capacity or special talent to be the next Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa or Barack Obama. All children are special and represent our future.

The early years of life will determine a person's physical and mental development. It will determine whether the person will be an independent and productive member of society or will be dependent on society. Furthermore, when hunger is combined with disease it is a double challenge. Hungry people with diminished bodies are more likely to get AIDS. Those with AIDS and those who are HIV-positive will not respond to medicine if they do not have sufficient calories to go with the drugs. There are countries in Africa where life expectancy is under 40 years of age, due to the combined effects of hunger and AIDS. There are medical doctors in Kenya who have taken up farming so that they can provide their patients with food to go with the AIDS drugs. A patient receives two prescriptions, one for medicine and one for food.

In short, while the primary objective of school feeding is to fight childhood hunger, there are other objectives and goals as well. It will help you achieve your primary objective if the secondary goals are identified. On this one point it might be instructive to look to the United States.

The U.S. "National School Lunch Act" was enacted in 1946 right after the close of World War II. It was a high priority at that time because so many American recruits failed their physical exams due to nutrition deficiency diseases. While the National School Lunch Act has been amended many times since 1946, the Declaration of Policy has never been amended. It reads:

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress,

- "as a measure of national security
- "to safeguard the health and

- “well being
- “of the Nation’s children and
- “to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agriculture commodities and other foods”
- we hereby establish nonprofit school lunch programs.

Each of these goals has its own constituency, and all of the stakeholders are essential to your program’s success.

Parents, especially poor parents, are not politically powerful. Your national school feeding initiative will need the support of the business community, educators, the health community and most of all the agriculture community...the farmers. When the American President Harry Truman signed the School Lunch Act in 1946 he said: “In the long view, no nation is healthier than its children or more prosperous than its farmers.” That is still the truth.

Dr. Namanga Ngongi, an important African leader from Cameroon is President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). AGRA is chaired by Kofi Annan, is staffed by African experts, and has the financial backing of the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations. AGRA is trying hard to boost food production in Africa and help grow Africa out of poverty. AGRA is working to improve seeds, soils, market systems and government policies to speed up and increase food production in Africa. Others are investing in the effort, including the World Bank, the United States and many other donor countries.

In order to boost farm production there must be a commitment to sound science, and capacity building. USAID just released a new publication entitled “Agricultural Biotechnology for Development”. In it USAID says: “In many developing countries, especially for the rural poor, economic growth and increased income-earning opportunities depend on the performance of the agriculture sector. Agricultural biotechnology offers an additional tool for increasing crop productivity.”

Building the agricultural economy, however, requires more than boosting production; it also requires building markets for what is produced. What better market can there be for your farmers than local school feeding programs and the nation’s children?

The political marriage of agriculture, education, and school feeding programs has worked all over the world.

At the African Union Summit in 2003 a proposal was adopted to focus on agriculture and dedicate 10% of each country’s national budget to agriculture. The framework is called CAADP, Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Program. For those of you from countries outside of Africa, that is still a good rule of thumb. Developing countries should be spending a minimum of 10% of their budget on agriculture. CAADP established four pillars for the program:

1. Land and water management.
2. Market access.
3. Agriculture research.
4. Food security and hunger.

Last year, The World Bank and the World Food Program issued a very important report entitled “Rethinking School Feeding.” It noted: “In the poorest countries, school feeding programs are emerging as a common social safety net response to crisis. They provide an incentive for poor

families to send their children to school....and keep them there....while improving their children's education. And these programs can be targeted to benefit the most vulnerable, especially girls affected by HIV."

The report concluded by saying that "A key message from this paper is

that the transition to sustainable national programs depends on mainstreaming school feeding into the national policies and plans, especially education sector plans."

School feeding must be integrated into your countries' policy goals for education, for health care, and for agriculture development. It is not enough to say that feeding children is the "right" thing to do. Feeding children must be linked to your national priorities.

There is a strong moral imperative to feed our children. But it will take more than morality to convince your government to spend limited resources on feeding children. You must marry morality with practicality and long-term national development. Hungry children will not learn and illiterate children cannot compete in a world economy.

Feeding children at school is about improving education, agriculture and health care, preventing AIDS, and building the economy. If you are in the Department of Education, reach out to join forces with the Secretary of Agriculture. If you are with the Department of Agriculture, go meet with the Secretary of Education and the Director of Economic Development and ask them to join with you. Reach out to the private sector in your country and your editorial writers to make sure they understand the practical necessity of starting and expanding school feeding programs.

It will not be easy in rural, poor areas, but these challenges can be met if there is a national commitment. There are several key steps in building a framework for school feeding programs:

- Devoting a minimum of 10% of the national budget to agriculture;
- Making sure that the 10% for agriculture includes food security;
- Recognizing that school feeding is the most effective structure for delivering food assistance to children;
- Making girls a special focus of the school feeding program;
- Linking your agricultural development goals directly to school feeding; and
- Seeking a national consensus that eliminating childhood hunger is a precondition to achieving your development goals.

The U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently spoke on world food security in Tokyo and noted:

"No matter where they live, children will only realize their full potential if they have regular access to food. Giving a child the opportunity for a brighter, more productive future, affects not only the individual child, but the community where that child is raised, the country where he or she lives, and all of the world. Working to eliminate food insecurity across the globe will provide incredible economic benefits to developing and developed countries alike. It will increase political stability in conflict and poverty-stricken regions, and put these countries on a path to future prosperity."

Secretary Vilsack has charted the course for all of us. Now, each of us must do our part. We must ensure that school feeding is recognized as the key to fighting childhood hunger but also as important to the larger policy goals of global food security and economic development.

