

Keeping Schools Open: School Feeding in Conflict and Crisis Dr. Abraham Horwitz Memorial Lecture

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"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."
H.G. Wells (1920)

It is an honour to deliver the 6th Dr. Abraham Horwitz Lecture. I am also privileged to speak on the subject of nutrition in the context of crisis and conflict, coming as I do from Lebanon, which has had more than its share of both.

Much of this lecture has been influenced by my own experience growing up amidst conflict and internal displacement. However, these remarks also stem from a unique opportunity in the summer of 2001 as a World Food Programme (WFP) School Feeding Associate. I was among twenty-eight students selected to travel to fifty-four countries, many of which were experiencing emergencies (e.g. Sierra Leone, East Timor, Colombia) to assess school feeding programmes in place. The stories and perspectives of all the associates considerably broadened my experience. The consensus at the end of the summer was that schools have the potential to address nutritional issues, as well as, provide a safe haven and a source of stability for children and their families both in areas experiencing emergencies, and where relocation as a result of such emergencies has occurred. School feeding programmes can play an instrumental role in keeping schools open in crisis and conflict.

Introduction

The early school feeding activities a century ago, e.g. following the Boer War in 1908, were concerned with "the poor health of army recruits"¹. Offering food in schools was perceived as a good way to ensure that children were healthy and well nourished, which would eventually make them strong soldiers. Today, the objectives of school feeding, we hope, are different.

Although there is no formal definition of school feeding in the literature, school feeding here refers to the use of the school institution as an instrument for delivery of food to children. Using the school structure ensures fast distribution of food when the facility is already in place, regular distribution when the structure is relatively stable, and optimal reach when the target group consists of those covered under the school activities. Typically, school feeding consist of food delivery in the form of wet meals, dry snacks, and/or take-home rations. While school meals are supplied on a daily basis as breakfast, mid-morning snack or lunch, take-home rations are distributed less frequently.

Defining the Objectives

In stable situations, school feeding programmes are often designed to enhance academic performance and cognitive development. Improved nutritional status of school-age children leads to better attention and cognition, and thus, better educational outcomes^{2,3}. The objectives of school feeding have also been expanded to include food security⁴, providing an income transfer to caregivers and reducing the opportunity cost for parents of sending children to school⁴.

Improved nutrition and school attendance, however, present particular challenges in the context of crisis and conflict. School feeding can improve attentiveness in class by reducing short-term hunger—many children come to school on an empty stomach—yet they remain surrounded by the distracting and disturbing facets of the crisis. Although school feeding can provide an incentive for increased school attendance, such crises also tend to pull children into the workforce either as formal labour or as child soldiers. In the case of formal labour, successful school feeding programmes in emergency situations should constitute an income transfer sufficiently large enough to outweigh an alternative income that children might earn elsewhere. For child soldiers who often support their families financially, the transfer must outweigh the benefits, especially access to food, provided by armed groups⁵. Hence the need to clearly define what the realistic and feasible objectives of school feeding in conflict and crisis are, especially during the acute stages of emergencies.

Refining the Objectives

Keeping schools open in times of crisis provides children with a sense of normality, an unbroken routine and a friendly and structured environment⁶. This is why, where at all possible, children should continue to go to school. School feeding may itself provide an incentive for keeping schools open. However, in times of crisis, school feeding is more than just an incentive, otherwise programmes that are less costly could be an alternative. Being tied to education, school feeding has the potential to preserve a generation of human capital, an advantage measurably more important in com-

⁴ Food security is defined by the World Bank (1986) as 'access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life'.

plex emergencies than in normal situations. In situations when other social support structures may be broken down, school feeding could also enhance the role of schools as social support structures for children. It may then be possible for educational, nutritional and psychological gains to emerge from this existing school infrastructure with benefits accruing synergistically.

The Wider Benefits of Emergency School Feeding

War is an adult problem, however, war's effects extend to all age categories. Children are emotionally and physically vulnerable, and often suffer profoundly because the conflict not only disrupts their normal routines and perceptions of security, but also predisposes them to psychological risks^{7,8}.

The familiar is reassuring, and going about the school routine helps children adapt better to the new situation. Children derive from the school system and their peers at school the ability to cope more effectively with intense emotions, stress and anxiety. The school, therefore, becomes more than an educational institution, it becomes a stable support structure.

When I was a child, we continued to go to school despite the bombshells. At school it was possible to block out the images of war, even though teachers were constantly adjusting school routines because of special circumstances. Most importantly, we were not allowed to "play war" during recess. Peers and teachers were an invaluable source of support for me and for my generation of children of war.

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Cooperation and Complementarity

Keeping schools open in such circumstances is difficult but not impossible through coordination of various groups. Ideally, the local communities would mobilize to restore schooling for their children. UNICEF would make educational inputs available plus access to water, sanitation and health services. WFP can identify the requirements for food aid and the logistics of delivery. Local NGOs can implement school feeding activities as prioritized by the community. Also community members themselves can participate in the reconstruction and food delivery works.

In Sierra Leone, humanitarian aid agencies and workers were able to access the town of Daru in the Kailahun District only after the UN deployed troops in the area, which ensured that Daru remained one of the few safe havens in continuously unstable surroundings⁹. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), with the support of UNICEF and UNHCR, expanded their Rapid Educational Programme (REP) to the region. REP is designed for children aged seven to 12 years (mainly refugees, displaced persons and returnees) who have missed out on years of schooling because of the war. The programme has been successful in promoting

the reintegration of children into the standard school systems and, thus, in furthering their educational growth. WFP, in turn, contributed cereals, pulses and vegetable oil, the main ingredients of the school meals provided by NRC to children attending the REP schools. In the first half of the 2000-2001 school year, the enrollment in the ten existing REPs was around 1,000 children. By February 2001, the number of enrolled children almost tripled and nine new REPs were added, an improvement appreciated both by the Government and external observers. Success in Daru led to the reopening of schools in other Kailahun District chiefdoms, despite the fact that the district itself remained unsafe for resettlement. By September 2001, the Ministry of Education had opened ten additional schools and the total enrollment had risen to over 6,500 children (40% of whom were girls).

WFP's Sierra Leone country office attributes this achievement in school enrollment and retention to community ownership of the programme as well as to the solid cooperation between partners: the NRC, WFP, UNICEF, local NGOs and community groups. All partners coordinated their efforts to collectively

provide school facilities, teaching materials and food. Host communities provided labor for the construction of kitchens and food preparation, as well as cooking utensils and

condiments. Communities rallied to make the emergency school feeding programme a success because having a school facility for their children provided a stable community institution in a volatile area.

In addition to enrollment figures, monitoring indicators such as perceived quality of education, parental satisfaction, and learning performance would be important to show overall effectiveness of the programmes in providing education to increasing numbers of children without decreasing the quality of that education.

Challenges to Emergency School Feeding

School feeding initiatives serve the developmental goal of building human capital as an investment in the future. Yet, implementing school feeding operations in an emergency, however, has more than its share of challenges and concerns. The major areas of concern relate to security, the political nature of the crisis and related vulnerability analysis, nutritional issues such as targeting and programme design, availability of teachers and school infrastructure, availability of complementary health activities, as well as gender-related issues.

The first issue of concern is security. Relative security is a prerequisite for all activities in emergencies to ensure access to the targeted areas, mobility of children and teachers to and from school, transport of food

commodities to the target areas and, importantly, delivery of food to its intended beneficiaries.

Complex emergencies are highly political and of long duration¹⁰, in addition, war strategies are often aimed at particular social, ethnic or political groups who are not necessarily the poorest^{11,12}. Therefore, understanding the political interplay that causes vulnerability^b, and incorporating this understanding into assessment and scope of school feeding programmes, is important to ensure that they effectively cater to those most in need¹³. In the case of children, vulnerability is often physiological and emotional, and possibly social, economic and political. School feeding goals would then be best served if the programmes are part of the wider nutritional strategy for the area experiencing conflict. This strategy might address livelihoods protection, food security and nutrition rehabilitation programmes, based on comprehensive needs assessment and the community priorities specific to the region.

Closely related to vulnerability assessment, is the issue of targeting. Often, malnourished children are delayed in enrolling in schools¹⁴ or may have dropped out to assist with household income generation. Moreover, targeting schools in the most food insecure areas, might not yield the desired returns because these are the schools with the least resources. Therefore, building monitoring and surveillance within the project is important to evaluate and understand effectiveness¹⁵. Adequate monitoring requires looking beyond the enrolment figures into the characteristics of those enrolled, and also, those who are not enrolled in schools. Moreover, school feeding programmes usually reach children between five and 15 years of age, a group that is often overlooked by assistance organizations that normally target younger children in supplementary feeding programmes. The objectives of the two, however, are different, and there is need for complementarity when they are implemented simultaneously, so that when malnourished children are identified, they could be rehabilitated before they enroll back in school.

Supplying culturally acceptable and familiar foods is another frequently noted concern in donor-assisted school feeding operations. Supplied food is usually tied to the surplus available from donor countries. (It goes without saying that any food aid provided should not have the effect of disrupting local markets or providing a disincentive to local agriculture.) The types of food provided become of particular concern when they fail to match the local eating customs of the recipient country. Some agencies have, however, addressed this challenge with creativity. In Bolivia, for example, the local NGO in charge of school feeding printed copies of the 'WFP Food Cook-Book' for school staff in charge of food preparation. The booklet illustrates

recipes using WFP-provided basic ingredients, to familiarize the cooking personnel with the new ingredients. In addition, the food provided for schools tends to be the same throughout the year. In rural Port-Sudan, active parent-teacher associations work to transform basic food ingredients into edible -and even desirable- food by their own contribution of condiments, flavourings and other seasonal crops.

This is the essence of genuine cooperation in food aid, namely, the provision of food aid to communities, who then take responsibility for its ultimate use. More so, when school feeding is built into analysis of existing government policies and commitment to continuing the programme beyond the emergencies, the exit strategy or the transition from emergency to government-assisted school feeding programme, becomes easier.

The need for an adequate number of trained teaching personnel is another important challenge. Because teachers are often among the first people to leave affected areas, a useful response may be the provision of incentives (in the form of food-for-teaching, where food shortage is an issue) to encourage them to remain in town. Related to teacher shortages is the problem of classroom overcrowding. Overcrowding, indeed, is often a by-product of school feeding, which has the effect of drawing more children to school than can be accommodated. Foreseeing the problem and rehabilitating schools in ways which might permit subsequent expansion, or rehabilitating a larger number of schools is an important consideration in view of the set objectives and expected impacts. In any case, school feeding programmes should not undermine the quality of education provided at the school.

It is often noted that school feeding ensures meals only to schools that are accessible. Consequently, schools in less accessible areas where children are most likely to benefit from food assistance, are often excluded. Overcoming this problem is a great challenge under any circumstances, particularly in complex emergencies where the school structure might be destroyed or considerably damaged. For example, in cases where the school structure has been destroyed and/or access to schools made impossible because of population displacement, an alternative school setting has been initiated by UNICEF through 'School-in-a-Box'^c. Tents are set up so that children can continue to go to school despite their displacement and the lack of school infrastructure (e.g. Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor)¹⁶. A combination of the School-in-a-Box and a food ration for every child and teacher attending the temporary school could be a useful short-term means of addressing immediate needs for a swift restoration of normality.

^b Vulnerability is 'defenselessness and insecurity in the face of particular risks' (Chambers, 1989).

^c A 'School in a Box' is a portable kit developed by UNICEF and UNESCO. It contains basic school supplies and educational materials for up to 80 children.

It must also be recognized that school feeding is but one element of school nutrition and health. Complementary health activities, including immunization (especially measles in internally displaced camps), de-worming, and the availability of safe drinking water and sanitary facilities are yet more important in emergencies than at other times. De-worming activities are carried out in conjunction with Ministries of Health and Ministries of Education's partnership with WFP-assisted school feeding in many countries (e.g. Nepal, the Dominican Republic, Mozambique). These integrated programmes require in-depth understanding of the health priorities in the area, as well as appropriate expertise and capacity to monitor health programmes.

Special attention also needs to be given to gender issues that may well emerge around emergency school feeding operations. It is recognized that girls experience war and displacement differently than boys because of their culturally defined social roles and expectations¹⁷. Girls are often reluctant to attend school

when safety concerns exist and are often the first to drop out when the family resources get scarce¹⁸. Their safety may be at risk while commuting to and from school, but also at school because of the potential for female child abuse and HIV/AIDS transmission (e.g. Ethiopia, Mozambique). Drop-outs also increase when the head of the household is absent because of war, or when both parents are absent, adding income generation and sibling care to the already heavy household responsibilities of girls. Improving girls' well-being by increasing their opportunities is, accordingly, an important goal. School feeding as an incentive for education is an important means of achieving this goal. Gender-based educational incentives have worked particularly well in drought-affected Pakistan where a WFP-assisted programme distributes oil rations for girls attending at least 20 days of schooling in a month. Enrollment, as a result, increased in participating schools by 76% and attendance increased from 76% to 93% in one year¹⁹. The oil ration in Pakistan, importantly,

Summary Table: Areas and issues of concern and means of addressing them

<i>Areas</i>	<i>Issues of concern</i>	<i>Potential means of addressing these issues</i>
<i>Security</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - safe access to target areas by children, teachers and aid workers - safe transport and delivery of food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - active government involvement
<i>Political and protracted nature of conflicts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - particular groups targeted by the conflict (e.g. ethnic, social) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vulnerability analysis to properly identify target groups - school feeding as part of the national nutritional strategy addressing priorities (livelihoods, food security, nutritional rehabilitation)
<i>Reach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - malnourished children start school late - schools in food insecure areas are difficult to reach - age group reached by school feeding programs is often not prioritized by assistance organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vulnerability analysis to properly identify target groups, areas and priorities - monitoring systems built into the programs - Complementarity between programs (especially school feeding and supplementary feeding)
<i>Foods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supply is tied to surplus from donor countries - same foods are provided all year round 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - matching donated food items to local eating habits - community involvement and input - preparing for transition from donor-assisted to government-assisted programs
<i>Teachers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teachers may be targeted in the conflict - classroom overcrowding may result from shortage of teachers and/or as a byproduct of offering food in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - security and vulnerability assessment - incentives for teachers - monitoring the quality of education - teacher training - rehabilitating adequate numbers of schools or foreseeing expansion
<i>School infrastructure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - school premises may be damaged and/or have limited resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - flexible alternative school structures (e.g. school-in-a-box)
<i>School health</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - immunization and de-worming complement school feeding - safe water and sanitation facilities are available in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - integrated and complementary school health activities - assessing health priorities - cooperation among agencies - monitoring programs
<i>Gender considerations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - social roles and expectations are culturally defined - commuting to and from school and unsafe school environment (child abuse and HIV transmission) - income generation and sibling care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gender-based educational incentives - food benefits outweigh the cost of sending girls to school - advocating child rights and gender equality

represents fully 10% of a poor family's monthly income and provides a substantial monetary incentive for these families²⁰.

Again, this needs to be done in conjunction with advocacy to address child rights and the underlying gender inequalities within the cultural norms, otherwise, achievements remain a temporary gain that has not addressed the root-causes of the problem.

The new WFP's emergency Food-for-Education operation in Afghanistan which is intended to start in April 2002 as part of their emergency response, addresses some of these issues²¹. It is intended to assist the government (the interim authority at this point) to establish and maintain an educational system that supports quality education for all by combining five components, three of which are food-for-work programmes: food for school construction or rehabilitation, food for teaching, and food for teacher training. The other two components are school feeding programmes: take-home rations for non-formal education, and in-school feeding (and, where necessary, take-home rations) for elementary school children (boys and girls, but especially girls). The challenges WFP is facing in Afghanistan are numerous, mainly availability of implementing partners capable of operating on a large scale quickly and efficiently; security concerns; limited resources of the interim government; safety of girls and women in commuting; and shortages in water supply. However, there is a window of opportunity for getting comprehensive attention to the education and nutrition of school-age children in Afghanistan. This opportunity ought to be addressed in the context of a comprehensive understanding of vulnerability, food security interventions and longer-term school feeding policies for the country.

In Conclusion

The importance of keeping schools open in times of crisis for the comprehensive well-being of children cannot be overstressed. The challenges are great, as they are in any venue in complex emergencies. What is needed is courage, not to be hindered by the complexity of the task or fearful of the limitations, rather be aware of the social role of education and the great potential of schools to serve multiple functions.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote, 'If we wish to create a lasting peace we must begin with the children'. Universal education and good health are basic children's rights, and they converge in one institution, the school. Protecting these rights when children's physical and psychological well-being are at stake, represents a formidable challenge. School feeding could play an instrumental role in meeting this challenge by helping maintain the school structure, and consequently providing education, contributing to good health and re-instituting normality in times of crisis.

In Lebanon, food was not short during the seventeen years of war, hope was. Schools were the most precious source of hope, they maintained our faith in the future.

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*School-Age Children:
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Global Consultation on Child and Adolescent Health

At the 12-13 March 2002 Global Consultation on Child and Adolescent Health, world leaders, WHO Director-General Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy, policy-makers, academics and a senior World Bank delegation gathered to discuss the dangers faced by the world's children and young people. An outcome of the Consultation was the Stockholm Commitment by World Leaders, which served as a framework for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, held in May.

The Stockholm Commitment, which makes no reference to nutrition, states:

"We envision a world where children and adolescents enjoy the highest possible level of health, a world that meets their needs and enables them to attain their full potential. We gather in Stockholm...to commit ourselves to intensify our efforts to achieve this aim, and to join together in partnership to seek bolder approaches to reach the most vulnerable, the most isolated and the poorest.

The way ahead is a shared vision: to mobilise our resources to improve the health and development of children and adolescents, expand coverage of effective health and development interventions to reach every child and adolescent, and empower families and communities to care for and foster the health and development of their younger members. Through these efforts we address poverty and inequity, conditions which lay the greatest burden of ill health on the poor and weaken our collective efforts to advance humanitarian aims and global peace."

For more information and conference materials visit:
www.who.int/consultation-child-adolescent