

School meals key to feeding and educating most vulnerable children – UN report



A beneficiary of WFP's school meals programme in Bolivia

24 November 2009 – The introduction of free meal programmes not only ensures children are fed, but are crucial to keeping the poorest and most vulnerable in school while providing a boost to learning and health, according to a United Nations report released today.

The new report from the World Bank and the World Food Programme (**WFP**) noted that although most countries offer meals to their students, poor nations face a double obstacle of expanding under-funded feeding programmes while battling the worst effects of the financial, food, and fuel crises, with little support from the international aid community.

"In the face of global crises, we must now focus on how school feeding programmes can be designed and implemented in a cost-effective and sustainable way to benefit and protect those most in need of help today and in the future," said **World Bank** President Robert B. Zoellick in a foreword to the Rethinking School Feeding: Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector report.

The report noted that school meal programmes are most effective when twinned with other measures such as de-worming and provision of micronutrient-fortified snacks and biscuits, or vitamin supplements.

In many countries, such programmes – along with abolition of school fees – are key incentives for children to attend school, especially girls and the poorest. A recent study of WFP data from 32 countries in sub-Saharan Africa showed that girls' enrolments went up by 28 per cent, twice the rate in schools not receiving assistance.

In addition, combining on-site school meals and take-home rations for a student's family prompted girls' enrolment in the highest grade of primary school to surge by 46 per cent, twice the yearly rate for girls in schools offering only on-site meals.

The study also found that older girls are less likely to drop out, and that girls in general are more likely to stay in class throughout primary school when they bring food home to their families on top of their school meals.

"At this critical hour of rising need, nations must stand together to help those who most risk tipping into crisis," said WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran in her forward to today's report.

"Nations such as Brazil and China have demonstrated that social safety net programmes like school meals help protect nutritionally vulnerable children and ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable do not plunge into destitution," said Ms. Sheeran.

"In partnership with the World Bank, WFP is working with nations to create the next generation of school meal programmes that are sustainable and effective – drawing, where possible, from the produce of local farmers," she added.

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