



# School feeding: now more than ever

In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit, 189 of the United Nations' member countries ratified the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including the global goal of universal primary education, or Education for All, by 2015. These goals are statements of global objectives for improving the human condition. They include indicators and measurements of progress against those objectives. The MDGs resulted from analyses and consultations over the past decade by area of concern (education, food security, poverty, gender, etc.). They are often cross-cutting, and link to individual and social well-being, particularly in relation to poverty.

The Millennium Development Goal for education is based upon the education goals set in an Education for All conference – the World Education Forum – held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000.

The outlook for Education for All by 2015 is not optimistic. While some progress has been made, it is clear that much work remains to be done if

universal primary education is to be achieved in the next 11 years. There are some problems with indicators and how to measure (for example, definitions of “school age” can vary by source), and for some countries data are lacking entirely or of poor quality. Nonetheless, there has been a “stocktaking” against three key indicators: net primary enrolment ratios, primary school completion and youth literacy.

Many regions are doing quite well in terms of net enrolment. Only sub-Saharan Africa lags far behind (at approximately 60 percent net enrolment); the Near East and South Asia (at about 85 percent net enrolment) are “slightly off track”; and all others have net enrolment rates of 95 percent or higher (Levine *et al.*, 2003).

Primary school completion rates are less promising. Eighty-six countries are considered to be at risk of failing to attain universal primary school completion by 2015; in fact, some countries have slipped backwards in recent years, with lower completion rates than in previous years. Again, Africa is well behind, with an average of only about one-half of school

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## The six Dakar “Education for All” goals

- Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
- Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

SOURCE: Education for All Information Kit, UNESCO, Paris.  
Available at [http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed\\_for\\_all/background/background\\_kit\\_contents.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/background/background_kit_contents.shtml)  
(accessed September 2003).

entrants completing primary school; in South Asia, the rate is just below 70 percent; completion rates in North Africa and the Near East are slightly above 70 percent; in East Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean an average of just over 80 percent of school entrants complete primary school; and in Eastern and Central Europe more than nine out of every ten children entering first grade remain in school through to primary school completion (Levine *et al.*, 2003).

As for literacy among 15- to 24-year-olds, the data are very weak. They indicate, however, that literacy in this age group is almost universal in Eastern Europe and Central Asia; in East Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean it is between 80 and 90 percent; among the populations of sub-Saharan Africa and the Near East and North Africa it is about 60 percent; and it is the lowest, at 50 to 60 percent, in South Asia (Levine *et al.*, 2003). Because of questions about the quality of data, projections based on recent trends are likely to be misleading. However, it is clear that a majority of countries – perhaps most – in the developing world are unlikely to reach the goal of universal literacy among 15- to 24-year-olds by 2015. Overall, then, there has been a particularly disappointing lack of progress in developing countries,

especially for girls’ education and for education in rural areas.

## Constraints to education in developing countries

### Poverty and hunger

Hungry children are less likely to go to school and less able to learn if they do attend. Poverty directly correlates with educational performance. The MDG Task Force on Primary Education and Gender Equality reports:

*Regional and national averages obscure tremendous variations in education performance across sub-populations. In general, education performance – both enrolment and retention – correlate very strongly with income within a country, although distinctive patterns of rich-poor differentials in schooling have been identified ... In the end, only about 20 percent of the poorest children and 50 percent of the middle-income children complete primary school, while nearly all of the children from the better-off households do.*

(Levine *et al.*, 2003).

For poor households, basic survival and sustenance issues can understandably take precedence over education. The attendance of poor children in rural

areas is lower than for their urban counterparts; drop-out rates are higher. Rural families often count on their children’s labour for tasks such as farm work; finding food, water and/or fuel supplies; child care and food preparation. In some cases, rather than being sent to school or kept at home to work, children are sent from rural areas to urban areas to seek employment so that families can be supported by their wages.

Rural poverty and hunger thus also help to explain some of the cultural practices that impede education. Early marriage, for example, and requiring girls to work at home are means by which poor families meet labour and/or income needs.

Poor families also experience difficulty in covering the cash costs of education. Official and unofficial school fees, and the cost of uniforms, books and supplies and other such expenses may be beyond meagre budgets.

### Access to education

Rural children have less access to schools, teachers and educational material than do urban children. Poor governments often do not extend social services to the most rural, hard-to-access areas. School buildings are often inadequate or non-existent. Teachers are often reluctant to work in rural areas because of the lack of basic services, and school supplies and books are harder to find in rural areas.

Children who live in sparsely populated rural areas may be required to walk long distances to school – demotivating students and raising family concerns about their children’s (particularly girls’) safety while en route to and from school.

### Poor health and nutrition

Poor nutrition and bad health prevent children from going to school and adversely affect their mental development and ability to concentrate in school. More specifically:

- Malaria has a devastating impact on school-age children.

- More than half of the world's schoolchildren are iron-deficient, with adolescent females suffering the highest prevalence of iron-deficiency anaemia. Iron deficiency weakens the child's immune system; reduces their

years of age are infected. The pandemic also has a profound impact on the welfare of uninfected children. Over 13 million children under the age of 15 have lost one or both parents to AIDS; this number is expected to

the investment is long-term and the benefits are impeded or derailed. Factors unrelated to education, such as natural disasters, war, disease or poor governance, can reduce or eliminate the benefits of an education at the individual level and/or

## Why food-assisted education? Because it works – in-school feeding and “take-home rations” result in higher enrolment and attendance rates, lower drop-out rates and improved student performance

physical development, cognitive ability and school performance; and causes fatigue.

- Some 60 million schoolchildren suffer from iodine deficiency, the leading cause of preventable intellectual impairment.
- School-age children are the group most affected by intestinal parasites, which account for more than 11 percent of the disease burden in children aged 5 to 14. Worm build-up and damage are generally the greatest in school-age children and can cause malnutrition, bowel obstruction, internal bleeding (and thus anaemia), low energy and discomfort, resulting in poor attendance and performance in school or for other tasks. In the worst cases, mental and physical retardation can result, or even death. An estimated 3.3 million children die from intestinal infections each year.
- Recent evidence suggests that vitamin A deficiency has a greater impact on school-age children than was previously recognized. Some 85 million school-age children are at higher risk of respiratory and other infections and blindness as a result of vitamin A deficiency.
- Although human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) infection rates are lowest for children aged 5 to 14, almost 3 million children under 15

almost double within ten years. Orphans and children living with HIV-positive parents are at high risk for nutritional, educational and psychosocial problems.

### Educational quality and environment

Child-friendly environments and high educational standards are difficult to achieve for poor schools, especially poor rural schools. Rural schools are less likely to have electricity, potable and running water, and sanitary facilities. They are often ill-equipped in terms of furnishings and school supplies. Lack of space and/or teachers may mean that grade levels have to be mixed, or class hours shortened in order to accommodate more than one class “shift” per day. If the schools are isolated or otherwise hard to access, they receive fewer supervisory visits and other forms of support and quality control. Poor schools thus are often less attractive to students and teachers alike.

### Inadequate resources and donor support

There is little dispute regarding the benefits of education, and most recipient and donor governments are committed to achieving the Education for All goals. At best, however, investment in education is long-term and the “pay-off” is delayed, requiring a generational cycle to be realized. At worst (and all too frequently),

assume political and budgetary priority at the policy level.

Donor support to education has fluctuated over the years, but has never achieved the recommended levels. Meanwhile, donor frustration regarding the outcomes of their investment in education has been quite high. The reasons cited are many, but largely revolve around the lack of recipient government commitment and management capacity, and sustainability. Donors can report educational attainment by individual beneficiaries, but for past investments in educational infrastructure, the track record is littered with examples of investments that were wasted or at least had only limited or short-term results due to the impact of mismanagement and corruption, conflict and/or natural disasters.

In comparing the return on investment in rural and urban education, it is clear that in order to reach an equivalent standard of achievement, the average cost per student is higher for rural schools than for urban schools. This is explained by factors such as the higher cost of transport and communications for schools located at a distance from central services and generally lower student-to-school ratios. Even if the rural voice were to carry equal political weight, a cash-strapped government would be more likely to give priority to fulfilling urban schooling needs on the basis of cost

factors: a larger number of urban students can be reached for the same cost as would be incurred for fewer students in higher-cost rural schools.

### Low levels of participation of the private sector

Scant attention appears to be given in developing countries to the role of the private sector in education. In developed countries, there are very strong direct and indirect links between education and private-sector interests. In simplified terms, governments invest in education and this investment creates employment and profits as well as producing a skilled workforce. Taxes are paid by both the workers and the companies, and some of the tax revenues are recycled into education. An interdependent network of individual, government and business interests is developed, which is sustainable over long periods if it is balanced and well-managed and governed.

This “healthy balance” is not achieved in most developing country situations. If national government investment in education is too low, or is in the form of expensive loans and/or external resources, the resultant employment and profit creation do not occur at adequate levels to sustain tax support at the levels required. Likewise, if the education system does not produce adequately and appropriately skilled workers, or if there is little opportunity for profit and employment for the workforce that has been educated, the balanced interests and system cannot be developed or maintained. The challenge is especially great in the context of poor rural communities, where employment and profit-making options are limited.

### School feeding and food for education

In 2000, the World Food Programme (WFP) began a global school-feeding campaign, to garner support for food aid-assisted education. Why school feeding? Why now?

Although not a panacea, school feeding and related food-assisted education

activities can directly address many of the constraints referred to above – and more. In addition, food-for-education activities can readily be “scaled up” to become a major tool in achieving the goal of Education for All.

Why food-assisted education? Because it works – in-school feeding and “take-home rations” (food to take home to their families given to students who achieve attendance standards) result in higher enrolment and attendance rates, lower drop-out rates and improved student performance. Other education-supportive uses of food aid include food-for-work for school, storage, latrine or well construction; food support for key school helpers; teacher training; and literacy and skills training for adults in the community.

School feeding provides an entry point for other interventions. The food acts as an incentive and catalyst for other things to happen. First, recipient communities tend to organize themselves to manage the food: its storage, preparation and use. This appears to be true even for “new” communities, or those with little or no prior organization or management experience. Community involvement contributes to programme management, complementary activities, and, in the long term, programme sustainability.

The food also acts as a leverage and catalyst for other partners. WFP’s main

partner in each country is the national government. Generally speaking, the government is involved in school-feeding activities at the national, regional and local levels. Normally, the government takes charge of the transport, handling and storage from WFP’s “extended delivery point” within a country, at least, and in many cases it plays a much broader role. In several countries, WFP’s assistance accounts for only a small portion of a national school-feeding programme managed by the government. This strong commitment on the part of national governments was evidenced in a recent set of studies by WFP of countries where it had supported school feeding in the past, but had now phased out its support. In each of the six countries visited (Botswana, Brazil, Jamaica, Namibia, Paraguay and Swaziland), school-feeding activities were continuing, several years after WFP’s departure.

In addition to strengthening community and government relationships, other international and local organizations can be mobilized to ensure a full range of complementary activities in the schools WFP is assisting. For example, WFP and the World Health Organization work together to ensure that beneficiary children are treated for intestinal parasites. An expanding WFP–United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) partnership involves a “minimum package” approach whereby



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UNICEF provides the schools with relevant complementary activities (for example, micronutrient fortification, clean water, latrines, health and nutrition education, and educational inputs). An agreement with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides two full-time professional staff to support WFP's offices in programme planning and evaluation. FAO and WFP are working together to expand and improve school garden and woodlot activities. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also provide needed skills and activities, especially for community-level activities such as organizing parent-teacher committees, community food storage and management, and monitoring the progress of planned activities. Other partnerships are also being explored, to address further infrastructure issues, the school environment and ecology, and other quality factors.

WFP and its partners are increasingly addressing the health and nutrition issues of school-age children, using the platform of school feeding. In addition to deworming treatment and micronutrient fortification or treatment, there is a strong focus on HIV/AIDS prevention, nutrition education, and hygiene and

sanitation. WFP and its partners are now exploring the use of other items that have proved effective for use by schools and/or students (e.g. bed nets that have been permanently treated with insecticide for malaria prevention and water filters for purifying the schools' water).

## What about costs and donor support?

The economics of achieving the Education for All goals are daunting. How can the quality and child-friendliness of poor schools be enhanced without large cost increases? There are two factors at least that can help to reduce, or at least to keep the cost-per-student and cost-per-school at a manageable level: scale and concentrated partnerships. Both of these require a collective will to make them happen. Donors and recipient governments alike must focus wholeheartedly on the "core necessities" and not become distracted by tangential issues.

"Core necessities" include the very, very basic requirements for a child to learn: a safe location (for a positive learning environment), a teacher (a literate adult role-model skilled in supporting children's learning), nutritious food (to provide the energy and micronutrients needed during the

school day), basic educational materials, clean water, gender-segregated sanitary facilities, and simple health treatments (including education in disease prevention).

The expertise to provide these basics is readily available, both internationally and within developing countries, for most of these items. Provided on a large scale, the cost-per-child for these core necessities is minimal, particularly in view of the return on investment that education provides.

If the key players agree on these necessities and work together to ensure clear understanding and cooperation to scale up in these areas, both traditional and new donors (including private-sector actors) can be convinced to invest in this core support to education. Among the key players are the recipient governments and communities themselves, who need to state their needs clearly and demonstrate their own commitment to the core necessities; international organizations and NGOs, who can organize their resources and priorities to support these necessities and to coordinate better among themselves in order to reduce interagency competition and reduce the management burden on developing country governments.

# reference

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In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit, 189 countries ratified the Millennium Development Goals, including the global goal of universal primary education. Much work is needed if the goal of “Education for All by 2015” is to be achieved, especially for girls’ education and for education in rural areas. This article reviews progress made in relation to three key indicators: net primary enrolment ratios, primary school completion and youth literacy. The constraints to education in developing countries are explained – such as poverty and hunger, lack of access to education, poor health and nutrition, low educational quality and environment, inadequate resources and donor support, and low levels of participation of the private sector.

In 2000, the World Food Programme began a global school-feeding campaign to garner support for food aid-assisted education. In-school feeding and “take-home rations” result in higher enrolment and attendance rates, decreased drop-outs and improved student performance. School feeding acts as an incentive and catalyst for other development work. Donors and recipient governments alike must focus wholeheartedly on the core necessities, including the very minimal requirements for a child to learn: a safe location, a teacher, nutritious food, basic educational materials, clean water, gender-segregated sanitary facilities and simple health treatments.

## L’alimentation scolaire: aujourd’hui, plus que jamais

En septembre 2000, à l’occasion du Sommet du Millénaire organisé par les Nations Unies, 189 pays ont ratifié les Objectifs du Millénaire pour le développement, parmi lesquels figure l’objectif global d’un enseignement primaire universel. La route menant à l’objectif de «L’éducation pour tous avant 2015» est longue, notamment pour ce qui est de la scolarisation des filles et de l’enseignement dans les zones rurales. Le présent article traite des progrès réalisés en ce qui concerne trois indicateurs clés: taux net d’inscription dans les écoles primaires, achèvement de la scolarisation primaire et alphabétisation des jeunes. Il décrit également les contraintes auxquelles fait face l’enseignement dans les pays en développement: pauvreté, faim, absence d’accès à l’école, mauvaise santé, mauvaise nutrition, médiocrité de l’enseignement et du milieu éducatif, manque de ressources et de soutien financier, faible degré de participation du secteur privé, etc.

En 2000, le Programme alimentaire mondial a lancé une campagne mondiale d’alimentation scolaire afin de recueillir des fonds pour des projets d’aide alimentaire dans les écoles. L’alimentation scolaire et les «rations à emporter» se traduisent par une hausse des inscriptions dans les écoles et des taux de fréquentation, une diminution des décrochages scolaires et l’amélioration des performances des élèves. L’alimentation scolaire stimule d’autres activités de développement en jouant un rôle de catalyseur. Donateurs et gouvernements bénéficiaires doivent faire tout leur possible pour mettre l’accent sur les besoins fondamentaux, notamment sur les éléments de base dont l’enfant doit disposer pour pouvoir apprendre: locaux sûrs, présence d’un professeur, aliments nutritifs, matériel pédagogique de base, eau propre, installations sanitaires distinctes pour les filles et pour les garçons et traitements sanitaires de base.

## Alimentación escolar: ahora más que nunca

En septiembre de 2000, en la Cumbre del Milenio de las Naciones Unidas, 189 países ratificaron los Objetivos de desarrollo del Milenio, y entre ellos el objetivo general de lograr la enseñanza primaria universal. Mucho queda aún por hacer para lograr el objetivo de «Educación para todos antes del año 2015», especialmente con respecto a la educación de las niñas y la enseñanza en las zonas rurales. En el presente artículo se examinan los progresos realizados en relación con tres indicadores básicos, a saber: el índice neto de matrícula en la enseñanza primaria, la terminación de estudios en dicho ciclo y la alfabetización de los jóvenes. Asimismo, se indican los obstáculos con los que tropieza la educación

en los países en desarrollo, a saber, la pobreza y el hambre, la falta de acceso a la educación, una sanidad y nutrición inadecuadas, la baja calidad de la enseñanza y un entorno educativo deficiente, la falta de recursos y apoyo de los donantes y la escasa participación del sector privado.

En 2000, el Programa mundial de alimentos emprendió una campaña mundial de alimentación escolar a fin de obtener apoyo para actividades de ayuda alimentaria destinadas a la educación. Los programas de alimentación escolar y de «raciones para llevar a casa» redundaron en un aumento de las tasas de matriculación y de asistencia, una disminución del abandono escolar y un mayor rendimiento de los alumnos. La alimentación escolar sirve de incentivo y catalizador para otras actividades de desarrollo. Tanto los donantes como los gobiernos que reciben la ayuda deben centrarse íntegramente en las necesidades fundamentales, incluidas las condiciones mínimas para que un niño aprenda: un lugar seguro, un maestro, alimentos nutritivos, los materiales didácticos básicos, agua potable, servicios sanitarios para niños y niñas y tratamientos médicos sencillos.