

## Introduction and contents

This 'key messages' document sets out the main facts we wish to communicate when raising awareness about Mary's Meals around the world. This includes not only our 'core' and 'secondary' organisational messages – as well as some key impact assessment findings – but also relevant statistics from external sources.

In addition to that, the 'About Mary's Meals' section brings together many of these key messages in narrative form. This document is produced and updated by the MMI Communications team. If you have any questions, comments or suggestions, please email Editorial Manager, Jane James ([Jane.James@marysmeals.org](mailto:Jane.James@marysmeals.org)).

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## 1. Our core messages

- Mary's Meals is a simple idea that works. By providing a daily meal in a place of education, Mary's Meals encourages children experiencing poverty and hunger into the classroom where they gain a basic education that can provide an escape route from poverty.
- Our vision is that every child receives one daily meal in their place of education and that all those who have more than they need, share with those who lack even the most basic things.
- Our mission is to enable people to offer their money, goods, skills, time, or prayer, and through this involvement, provide the most effective help to those suffering the effects of extreme poverty in the world's poorest communities.
- The global average cost to provide a child with Mary's Meals for a whole school year is just £19.15 (GBP) / €22 (EUR) / \$25.20 USD.<sup>1</sup>
- The worldwide cost per meal is 10p GBP / 11c EUR / 13c USD.
- Mary's Meals serves nutritious meals to more than 2.6 million children<sup>2</sup> every day at school in 16 countries, across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.
- Mary's Meals increases school enrolment and improves school attendance. In schools where our meals are served, far fewer children leave school early because of hunger.
- We are determined to keep our promise of a nutritious daily meal in school to those children who are already part of our school feeding programme and – as funds allow – reach the next child waiting for Mary's Meals.
- Mary's Meals is a grassroots global movement; an intrinsic part of our work is to involve as many people as possible, recognising that each of us has a unique part to play in this mission.
- Without passionate, motivated volunteers, Mary's Meals cannot function.

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<sup>1</sup> The global cost-per-child in Australian dollars is \$34.80 AUD, Bosnia-Herzegovina marks is 42 BAM, Canadian dollars is \$31.70 CAD, Czech koruna is 550 CZK, Polish zloty is 92.40 PLN, and Swiss francs is 24.50 CHF.

<sup>2</sup> We currently don't have a precise, seven-digit number of children in our programme to share publicly, so please ensure all messaging uses 'more than 2.6 million children' where possible.

- Local communities own and run Mary's Meals in the countries where the programme operates.
- Wherever possible, our meals are made with locally sourced food, thereby supporting the local economy.

## 2. Our secondary messages

- Mary's Meals grew out of a charity called Scottish International Relief, which was set up after Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow and his brother Fergus took aid from their home in Argyll to Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, during the Bosnian War.
- The global Mary's Meals campaign was born in 2002 when Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow visited Malawi during a famine and met a mother dying from AIDS. When he asked her eldest son, Edward, what his dreams were in life, he replied simply: "To have enough food to eat and to be able to go to school one day."
- Craig Lodge Family House of Prayer is the Catholic retreat centre that the MacFarlane-Barrow family were inspired to open after a trip to Medjugorje in 1983.
- The work of Mary's Meals grew out of Medjugorje – the small town in Bosnia-Herzegovina where it is claimed the Virgin Mary has been appearing since 1981 – and Craig Lodge.
- Mary's Meals is named after Mary, the mother of Jesus, who brought up her own child in poverty.
- Mary's Meals consists of, respects, and reaches out to people of all faiths and none.
- We have a commitment to keeping our running costs low and we ensure at least 93% of donations are spent on our charitable activities.
- Mary's Meals operates its international headquarters from a tin shed in a remote part of the Scottish Highlands.
- For many children, Mary's Meals may be the only meal they will have that day.
- Mary's Meals is independent of, but co-operates with, government bodies in the countries in which it operates.
- In schools where our daily meals are served, hunger is reduced, enrolment increases, attendance improves, drop-out rates fall, absences dwindle, concentration in lessons is heightened, participation levels increase, communities worry less about children being hungry, and children are happier.
- Our school feeding programmes encourage all children to attend school. Girls make up around 50% of children across our programmes globally.
- The Mary's Meals Sponsor A School campaign invites individuals, families, businesses, church groups, community clubs and schools to commit to feeding all the children at a named school in Malawi or Zambia for an entire school year.

## 3. About Mary's Meals

Mary's Meals is a global movement that sets up school feeding programmes in some of the world's poorest communities, where poverty and hunger prevent children from gaining an education.

Our idea is a simple one that works. We provide one daily meal in a place of learning to bring children from vulnerable communities into the classroom, where they receive an education that can, in the future, be their ladder out of poverty.

The Mary's Meals campaign was born in 2002 when Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, from Scotland, visited Malawi during a famine and met a mother dying from AIDS. When Magnus asked her eldest son Edward what his dreams were in life, he replied simply: "I want to have enough food to eat and to be able to go to school one day."

That moment was a key part of the inspiration which led to the founding of Mary's Meals, which began by feeding around 200 children in Malawi in 2003. Today we serve more than 2.6 million children every school day in 16 countries: Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The average worldwide cost for us to feed a child for a whole school year is just £19.15 / €22 / \$25.20 (USD).<sup>1</sup> Where children receive Mary's Meals, there is a rise in school enrolment, attendance, and participation. We buy locally sourced food for our school feeding menus wherever possible, providing an assured market for farmers and their families, and supporting economic growth.

We work extremely hard to keep our running costs low and to ensure that at least 93% of donations can be spent directly on our charitable activities. This is only possible because most of our work is done by many thousands of dedicated volunteers all over the world who carry out lots of little acts of love on behalf of Mary's Meals.

The Mary's Meals campaign began in 2002, but Magnus first became involved in international aid work during the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, when he and his family decided to do something to help those who were suffering because of the conflict.

They relied heavily on the generosity of local people in their village of Dalmally in Argyll, Scotland, who diligently donated food, blankets, and other items of aid, which were then stored in the family shed, before being driven out to Bosnia-Herzegovina by Magnus. That same shed still serves as the global headquarters of Mary's Meals – and Magnus' office as CEO – to this day.

The charity is named in honour of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who brought up her own child in poverty. We consist of, respect, and reach out to people of all faiths and none.

Counting on support from around the globe, Mary's Meals has registered affiliate organisations in Australia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, as well as international fundraising groups in Belgium, Hong Kong, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovenia. We also have an office and Visitor Centre in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Today, it is estimated that 71 million primary school-age children are out of school. Instead of sitting in a classroom, they could be working or begging in an effort to survive. Millions more attend school so hungry that they are not able to concentrate and learn.

Mary's Meals' vision is that every child receives one daily meal in their place of education and that all those who have more than they need, share with those who lack even the most basic things. Working together with people who share our vision, we believe that it can be achieved in this world where there is enough food for everyone.

We are humbled and heartened by the support we receive from people all over the world who refuse to accept that any child in this world of plenty should endure a day without a meal. As a result of the generosity and dedication of our supporters, partners, and volunteers – including tens of thousands of volunteer cooks from the communities running our programme – millions of children are sitting in a classroom with a full stomach, learning how to read and write.

We firmly believe that the children who receive Mary's Meals today can one day grow up, well-nourished and well-educated, to become the men and women who will lift their communities out of poverty and end their reliance on aid. We call them 'Generation Hope'.

## 4. Key facts from external sources

- There are **71 million** children of primary school-age (about 6 to 11 years) who are out of school. This is an out-of-school rate of **around 10%** for primary school-age children.

[Source: *Global education monitoring (GEM) report 2024/25* – [UNESCO GEM report](#)]

- An estimated **73 million** children do not have access to the school meals they need to concentrate and learn to the best of their ability.

[Source: *WFP, 2021* – [State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020 \(wfp.org\)](#)]

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- Nearly half of all deaths in children under five are attributable to undernutrition; undernutrition puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, increases the frequency and severity of such infections, and delays recovery.

[Source: [UNICEF, 2022 – Malnutrition \(data.unicef.org\)](#)]

- Stunting affected an estimated 22% of all children under five in 2020.

[Source: [UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank Group 2019 – The State of the World's Children 2019 \(features.unicef.org\)](#)]

- **200 million** children's lives are at risk because they are malnourished.

[Source: [UNICEF, 2020](#)]

- Across the globe, up to **828 million** people do not have enough food.

[Source: [WFP, 2020](#)]

- An estimated **356 million** children live in extreme poverty. Children are more likely to live in poverty than adults. They're also more vulnerable to its effects.

[Source: [UNICEF, 2021](#)]

## 5. Our impact assessment findings

[Source: [Our impact story, Mary's Meals' Impact Assessment Report 2021](#)]

Our five-year impact report observed our school feeding programme in two of our largest country programmes: Malawi and Zambia. The study assessed the impact of school feeding in both programme schools and control schools and included a baseline prior to when feeding began at the programme schools.

Over the five-year period, we carried out a total of 15,258 surveys, 407 focus groups and 87 interviews in Malawi and Zambia and, in 2017, we added a third country, Liberia, to our research, to expand our understanding in a very different country context. The research and findings have been verified by INTRAC, an external research organisation. A summary of our key findings is outlined below.

### Outcomes 1&2: Reduces child hunger / Gives children energy

Mary's Meals reduces hunger for both boys and girls, giving energy at school.

#### After one year of the programme, we found that:

- Children in Malawi were 29x more likely to never feel hungry while at school compared to those not receiving Mary's Meals.
- 99% of children in Malawi and Zambia had 'some energy' or 'lots of energy' after eating Mary's Meals.

### Outcome 3: Improves child wellbeing at school

Mary's Meals significantly reduces children's worries about being hungry and helps them to feel happier at school.

#### After five years of receiving Mary's Meals, we found that:

- The percentage of children in Malawi who felt happy in school rose by 25%.
- The percentage of children in Zambia that never worried about hunger rose by 45%.
- Volunteers in Zambia worrying about children being hungry 'most of the time' or 'always' fell from 25% at baseline to 0% in five years.

#### **Outcome 4: Helps more children access school**

Mary's Meals increases school enrolment and improves attendance. In schools where our meals are served, far fewer children leave school early because of hunger.

##### **We found that, after the introduction of daily meals:**

- Enrolment increased by an average of 25% in our programme schools.
- Absence from school reduced significantly in both countries (Malawi and Zambia).

#### **Outcomes 5&6: More children engage in school and more children progress through school**

Mary's Meals helps children to concentrate in class and makes them more able to participate in lessons.

##### **After five years of receiving Mary's Meals, we found that:**

- Children in Zambia were 3x more likely to participate in class than those not yet receiving Mary's Meals.
- Children in Malawi were 4.4x more likely to participate in class than those not yet receiving Mary's Meals.
- The percentage of children in Zambia reporting that they never had difficulty concentrating rose from 35% at baseline to 75% in year five.

#### **Outcomes 7&8: The value placed on education increases and community ownership and engagement in each school feeding programme increases**

Mary's Meals works in schools where community support for education is consistently high and actively engages volunteers in the school feeding programmes.

##### **In each year surveyed, we found that:**

- 100% of communities in Malawi and Zambia where children receive Mary's Meals said it was 'important' or 'very important' that children get an education.

The most up-to-date information is available at [marysmeals.org](http://marysmeals.org)