

Food for thought - School feeding programmes and positive external effects

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Around the world about 300 million children are continually hungry, and 100 million of them, mostly girls, do not attend school. These are the findings of the International Food Policy Research Institute – an organisation dedicated to finding “sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty”. On the local front, half of South Africa’s children live with full-blown nutritional deprivation. A national survey by the Department of Health in 1999 found that more than half of South African children under the age of nine consume less than half the recommended daily amounts of energy, iron, zinc, calcium and vitamins A and C that their bodies need.

Children who are malnourished or even experiencing short-term hunger have limited capacities to learn. According to the World Bank, poor nutrition can cause attention deficits, sensory impairments and poor school attendance. 300 million children worldwide and approximately half of South Africa’s children thus have a reduced capacity to learn and may not be attending school because of malnutrition or temporary hunger.

School feeding programmes, where learners are fed meals or snacks at school, are a way to reduce short-term hunger and improve the nutrition of children so that they are better able to concentrate, understand and perform academically.

Like many other food intervention programmes, free school meals are often seen as charity. But these meals benefit more than just the children who are fed at school. Feeding children at school benefits the community and society at large. This is known in economics as a “*positive external effect*”.

A positive external effect occurs when the activities of one person affects the wellbeing of another person(s) in a way that is not measured directly. With a positive externality the benefits to society are greater than the private benefits to a specific person. When a child is educated, it is not just that child who benefits. Instead the household, family and greater community benefit as well. There are benefits to society in terms of greater productivity, which lead to higher combined earnings and eventually to greater economic growth. Higher levels of education are also, according to South African Economist Philip Black, associated with lower birth and crime rates, thus reducing pressures on government to provide additional health care and police facilities. In a similar way, when one person has good health, it benefits more than just that person.

The meals children receive at school contribute to better nourishment and health for these children. Healthier and better-nourished children in turn mean a lower burden of disease for society and the government to bear. Better nutrition also means better physical and mental development of these children, which leads to more productive and intellectually able adults in future. School feeding programmes lead to greater enrolment in school and improve the ability to learn. In these ways school meals lead to the positive external effects associated with education and health.

School meals have also been linked in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In November 2004 leaders of the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP) and World Vision urged a massive increase in donor funds for school feeding programmes because they believe that school meals are an effective, yet largely unused, way to attract children to school and reduce HIV/AIDS infections among school-aged children. Growing evidence supports the link between the level of education and a stable/lower prevalence of HIV. James Morris, WFP's executive director believes that "A basic meal in school is the gateway to a better, brighter and, crucially, an HIV/AIDS free future."

Childhood poverty is an important factor in persistent poverty and in the continuation of poverty across generations. Economists from the Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Centre in London argue that preventing poverty in childhood can help prevent the reinforcement of poverty across generations. Fighting childhood poverty today through school feeding programmes could mean that vicious cycles of poverty can be broken, as the children who benefit from government or community assistance today can be more productive as adults in the future.

South Africa's Primary School Feeding Scheme (PSFS) was introduced by President Nelson Mandela as a Presidential Lead Project of the RDP in 1994. The initial budget for this programme, from the National Treasury, was R472.8 million in 1994 and ten years later, in 2004, was R832.2 million. 5 million primary school children per year, on average, were fed through this initiative during the last 10 years.

School feeding programmes are not just another form of charity. The improved health and education of these 5 million plus children being fed across South Africa, will lead to a stronger, healthier, more educated economy that will benefit even more people than only these 5 million children.