



# Our impact story

Mary's Meals 2023 Annual Impact Report

mary's  
meals

a simple solution  
to world hunger

**For more than 20 years, Mary's Meals International has focused on providing school meals to reduce hunger and promote access to education.**

We believe that daily meals served in a place of education offer **a simple solution to child hunger**, with wider impacts on children's education and wellbeing globally. In 2023, we remained fixed on our goal of reaching the children most in need of consistent and reliable daily school meals, on average serving more than 2.4 million children in over 5,000 places of education.

**Our vision is that every child receives one daily meal in their place of education.**

We know that our vision is not an unrealistic dream and we have long known that consistent school meals are a fundamental building block for quality education. Throughout 2023 we have seen school meals gain attention for their potential to address both food insecurity and education gaps.<sup>1</sup>

In 2023, school meals were also added as an official indicator under Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education,<sup>2</sup> signaling global recognition of **school meals** as a key intervention to **improve access to education**<sup>3</sup> and **ensure inclusive and effective learning environments for all**.<sup>4</sup>



**More than  
2.4 million  
children\***

\*average throughout 2023



**Over 5,000  
places of  
education**

## A critical need for meals in school

School meals have become an even more urgent priority as the world continues to face overlapping food and education crises, affecting millions of children in our programme countries and beyond. Food insecurity has remained high in the regions where we work, driven primarily by conflict, economic factors, and extreme weather events. In 2022, 2.4 billion people experienced unstable access to food.<sup>5</sup> Since then, global statistics point to **intensifying need**, with 238 million people across 48 countries experiencing acute food insecurity.<sup>6</sup>



It is also estimated that **67 million primary school children remain out of school**, more than half of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>7</sup> Education gaps have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and even children who are in school have fallen behind in their learning outcomes.<sup>8</sup> For many of these children, hunger remains a primary barrier to learning both in terms of access to education and readiness to learn.

**“I can barely learn when I am hungry because I do not concentrate well in class.”**

**Mathews, 12, Malawi**

# Our school meals: an overview of 2023 key programme metrics

Our programmatic focus remains on the **consistent delivery of school meals** as the core of our work.

The average monthly attendance rate was

## 88%





The distribution of daily meals showed a balanced gender split, with **girls receiving 50.4%** and **boys receiving 49.6%** of meals respectively.

From 2020 to 2023, we saw a **natural enrolment growth rate** of



## 1.2%

in our existing programme schools.



# Our child-focused impact

In 2023, we continued our **impact assessment** work, examining the school feeding programmes' impacts on children by **interviewing learners** (using specially designed child surveys that incorporated child-friendly language and images) and **collecting teacher and parent perspectives**. In our impact framework, we explore the influence of school meals on a child's readiness to learn. We understand that school meals are vital in reducing hunger and improving school attendance, participation, and progression.



**“Every time I am in school, I enjoy Mary’s Meals porridge. The porridge gives me energy to participate in class. I can concentrate in class better after I eat my porridge.”**

Ruth, 14, Zambia

Our research to explore readiness to learn includes **annual impact assessments** to monitor our ongoing impact, and **expansion studies** that survey children before and after the introduction of our school feeding programme. Annual impact assessments allow us to track the ongoing impacts provided by the consistent delivery of a daily meal in a place of education. Expansion studies demonstrate the immediate benefits to children with the introduction of a daily meal at school.

# Country overviews

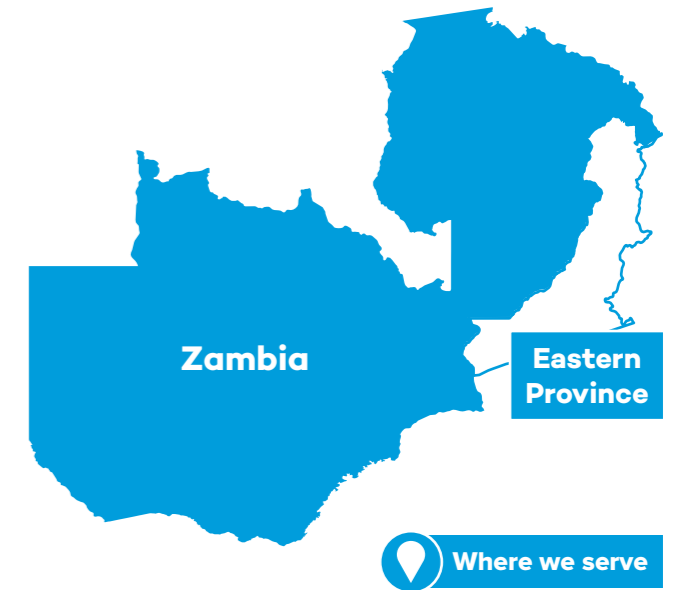
## Liberia

In Liberia, over half a million people are estimated to experience acute food insecurity<sup>9</sup> and over 30% of primary school-age children are out of school,<sup>10</sup> though the Ministry of Education is currently revising and strengthening its National School Feeding Policy, with engagement from school feeding agencies including Mary's Meals Liberia (MML). In 2023, MML fed more than 100,000 children, and led an annual impact assessment that surveyed 765 children and 137 teachers.



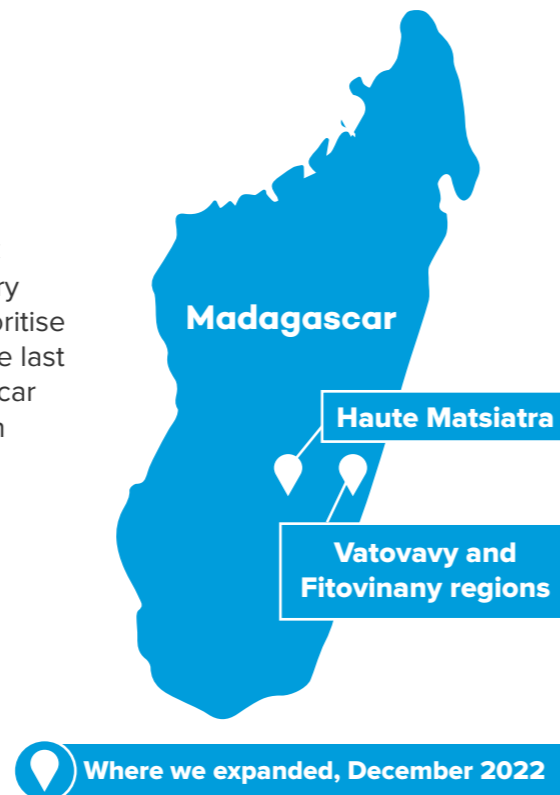
## Zambia

In Zambia, 14% of the population is experiencing IPC 'Crisis' or worse levels of food insecurity in a major food crisis with 2 million people affected. Primary education enrolment is high in Zambia<sup>12</sup> and the government promotes school meals as one key social intervention for improving access to education.<sup>13</sup> In 2023, Mary's Meals Zambia (MMZ) provided a daily school meal to more than 400,000 children in more than 700 places of education and led an annual impact assessment that surveyed 782 children and 62 teachers.



## Madagascar

In Madagascar, 36% of the population is experiencing IPC 'Crisis' or worse levels of food insecurity, and while primary school enrolment is high and the government aims to prioritise education, only 30% of boys and 33% of girls persist to the last grade of primary.<sup>11</sup> In partnership with Feedback Madagascar (FBM), we expanded to reach an additional 9,485 children across 46 schools. FBM completed an expansion study in 2023 including surveys with children one month before (100 children), and three months after (86 children) the introduction of school feeding.



## Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, over 20% of the population is experiencing IPC 'Crisis' or worse levels of food insecurity. Primary education enrolment is high in Zimbabwe and the government has made education a priority, emphasising the importance of school meals. In partnership with Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP), in 2023 we expanded to 35 primary schools, reaching an additional 10,518 children. ORAP conducted an expansion study including surveys with children one month before (407 children), and nine months after (319 children) the introduction of school feeding.



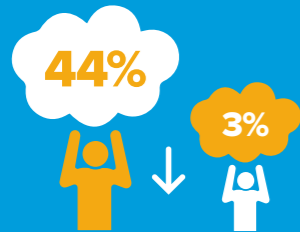
# Readiness to learn

At Mary's Meals, we understand that school meals are an important pre-requisite for receiving a quality education. Our impact framework seeks to understand the ways that consistent school meals improve a child's readiness to learn.

Throughout 2023, we tracked **child-focused indicators** in the four programmes where we directly implement school feeding – Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia. Across these four programmes, 3,100 children were surveyed about the impacts of daily school meals on reducing hunger, as well as improving school attendance, participation, and ultimately progression through school.

## Hunger reduction

Our school feeding programmes reduce hunger and hunger-related worries that disrupt education.



Before we began serving the meal, **44%** of children felt **worried about hunger at school**. This dropped to **3%** after they began receiving our meals.

Results taken from ORAP Expansion Study



**57%** of children felt **hungry at school** before our meals were introduced. This dropped to **7%** after we began serving meals.

Results taken from FBM Expansion Study



## School attendance

Our school feeding programmes reduce the incidence of children missing school.



Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes



Before our meals were served, **39%** of children **missed school at least once a week**, often because of hunger. After school feeding began, only **7%** missed school and **never because of hunger**.

Results taken from FBM Expansion Study

“The porridge is a big motivating factor for the children to come to school. Not even a day do they want to miss school because of the porridge at school.”

Parent, Zambia

Our school feeding programmes encourage children to stay in school for the duration of the day.



Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes



Results taken from FBM Expansion Study

“Mary's Meals feeding programme serves as a motivating factor for me to take education seriously, so that I can make positive difference in the society.”

Prince, 15, Liberia



## Concentration

Our school feeding programmes help children to concentrate on their lessons.

36% of children felt that they could concentrate well before the meal was served.



This increased to 98% after they had eaten.

Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes

14% of children found it difficult to concentrate on lessons before the meal was introduced.



This dropped to 1% after the children began receiving our meals.

Results taken from ORAP Expansion Study

“The porridge helps to keep our children in school. They learn in class with a full stomach, and this helps them to concentrate.”

Parent, Zambia

## Participation

School feeding programmes give children energy that helps them to participate in lessons.

Only 5% of teachers stated that the children in their classroom had high energy levels before the meal. This increased to 95% after the meal was served.



Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes



“The children are always energetic, and this makes their bodies strong.”



Parent, Zambia



# Keeping children in school

Teachers across our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes believe that the meal leads to:



Teachers in Kenya, Liberia, Malawi and Zambia shared that daily meals support children staying in school for the duration of their primary education.

In open-ended discussions with 312 teachers in Kenya, Liberia, Malawi and Zambia, the daily meal was highlighted as a powerful motivating factor for children to attend classes regularly and consistently. In turn, children are more likely to progress to the next level of education, and more likely to stay at grade level for their age.<sup>14</sup>

**99%**  
of teachers stated that school meals **reduce the number of children dropping out** of school.

Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes

**Teachers believe that school meals support quality education:** with improved attendance, learning is less interrupted, and the class is able to progress through lessons more quickly throughout the year.

Results from our Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Zambia programmes

**“The meals boost the energy level of the children, make them happy, and encourage them to come to school every day.”**

Teacher, Liberia

Parents in Liberia and Zambia highlight community benefits of the daily meal, and keeping children in school.

Focus group discussions with parents in Liberia (eight school communities and 47 parents total) and Zambia (six school communities and 40 parents total) highlighted the benefits of the school feeding programme for their children, but discussion also focused on the broader impacts for families and their wider communities.

## Family finances

**“I do not always have to give my child money for food at school. That money is now being channelled to other household needs.”**

Caregiver, Zambia

## Hope and opportunity

**“When the child gets educated, he/she has a heart of changing the face of the community by fostering development in the area they were brought up. For example, they can be a prominent society leader like an area counsellor who will help with the construction of boreholes.”**

Caregiver, Zambia

## Community wellbeing

**“When children get a regular meal at school, it stops them from going around in the community in search of food.”**

Parent, Liberia

## Community cooperation

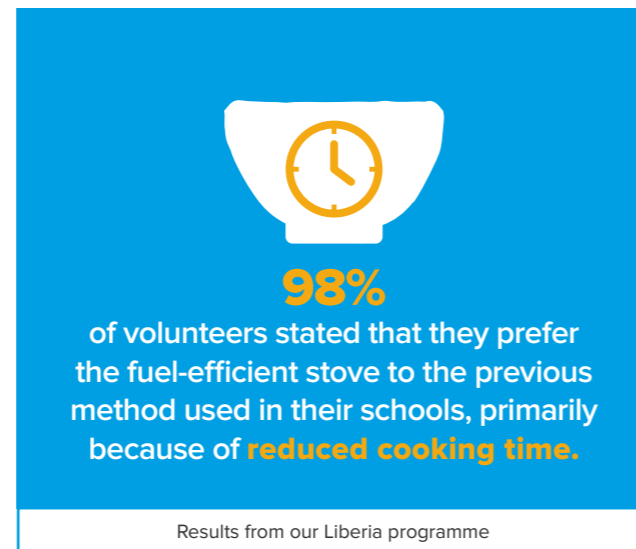
**“The [school feeding committee] makes children, parents, and community build a strong relationship through the school meal.”**

Caregiver, Liberia

# Responding to an ever-changing world

## Local environments: fuel-efficient stoves in Liberia

In line with our commitment to ensure that activities are carried out in an environmentally responsible manner, we have been installing fuel-efficient stoves in school kitchens in Liberia, and training school leaders and community volunteers on use and maintenance. Fuel-efficient stoves use wood fuel that is realistic and accessible in Liberian communities. This intervention has proven to be an effective strategy for reducing wood consumption and improving energy efficiency. To determine the sustainability of the stoves for the communities, we conducted a survey with 38 volunteer cooks and 19 teachers.



## Household level impact: hearing from caregivers in Madagascar

School feeding programmes provide a critical contribution to a social safety net by offering children consistent access to a daily meal in their place of education. A daily meal served in school has been shown to have wider benefits for households and communities. We conducted qualitative research with 40 household members who have children receiving our meals in Madagascar. Our findings suggested socio-economic and health-related benefits at the household and community level. These benefits include:

### IMPROVED FOOD SECURITY

Parents worry less from Monday to Friday because they know children will eat at school, therefore are sometimes able to share household food with those who have less.

### MORE FLEXIBILITY IN ECONOMIC RESOURCES

School feeding programmes allow parents to redirect household supplies to other needs.

### STRONG COMMUNITY COHESION

Households work together to deliver the feeding programme for the children in their community.

### INCREASED EMPHASIS ON EDUCATION

The daily meal is a strong motivation for encouraging children to attend school.

### INCREASED AVAILABILITY FOR WORK

Parents do not have to return home during the day to provide a lunch for school-going children.

### IMPROVE HEALTH AND HYGIENE

Both the children and the wider household experienced benefits, which they attribute both to the daily meal and handwashing, which has become routine in the household.



We are **determined to never lose focus on the individual child** at the centre of our work and our overwhelming desire to ensure they eat at school today. As such, we remain **committed to placing children's voices at the core of understanding our impact**. We know that by ensuring the provision of a reliable daily meal in a place of education, we can support hunger reduction, quality education, and keeping children in school.



The children's quotes used in this document were collected as part of our day-to-day communications work during 2023.





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