

Ending Child Hunger



School lunch program in Vienna, Austria in 1945. (National Archives 208-AA-134-AA-2)

School Lunches for Kids Around the World

by William Lambers

Imagine yourself the commander of American forces in Austria following World War II. Austria and other European nations have just been liberated from Nazi Germany. Your task is to help Austria rebuild from the destruction and chaos caused by the war and become a strong, free society. Where do you begin? One of the areas you would have to address is the health of the Austrian people. Is there enough food available to prevent hunger? Is there medicine and health care to prevent outbreaks of disease? What about the well-being of Austrian children, the very future of their country? Is there enough food and medicine for these children? Do you reopen schools to help kids resume a normal life and their education?

These are some of the challenges that did indeed face General Mark Clark following World War II. In 1945, General Clark was given the task of heading the U.S. military government of Austria.

But some disturbing trends had emerged in the civilian population of Austria. Child malnutrition was a serious crisis, especially in the cities. In July of 1945 “Austrian school physicians surveyed 25,699 children finding 27% markedly undernourished.” Action had to be taken and school feeding programs were implemented. These programs often consisted of soup along with a roll as a school lunch. The kids also received a surprise once a week: a small cake would be served.

The goal was to relieve the malnutrition inflicting so many kids, but also to keep attendance boosted in school. It was clearly the right decision to keep schools open and provide the meals. A U.S. report stated that “In view of the possible physical and moral status of the children, the purely educational aspects of keeping the schools open are of secondary importance. Whereas, their closing means cancellation of the “lunch” program and the release of more than one hundred thousand children from the discipline of the school to roam at will throughout the city of Vienna.”

The school lunch initiative in Austria was part of a larger effort to relieve hunger in post-war Europe. The fight against hunger in Europe continued through post-war programs such as the Marshall Plan, the U.S.-sponsored initiative to rebuild Europe and its economy.



Children in Europe were in desperate need of American aid following World War II. (National Archives 286-MP-MISC-738)

In a July 8, 1948 speech for a United Nations Appeal for Overseas Aid, General Dwight D. Eisenhower emphasized that ending child hunger was crucial to world peace. He believed that children forced to search through the “garbage heaps” for sustenance would become “wedded to the philosophy of force.” He stated, “If we are serious about saying that we want to travel the road to peace..how can we attempt to say that we are traveling that road unless we do everything that lies within our power to create conditions in which peace may flourish. We must eliminate starvation--we must see that children are well nourished.”

Today, 300 million children worldwide suffer from hunger. This booklet contains articles about a United States initiative, the McGovern-Dole Global School Feeding Program, which combines food with another vital need: education. The idea is to provide school lunches for kids around the world to end their hunger and give them hope for a brighter future.

Expand the McGovern-Dole Global School Feeding Program

by William Lambers
(November 2006)

After World War II, the United States sponsored the Marshall Plan, which helped rebuild war-torn Europe. Food aid, medicine and reconstruction efforts vastly improved the lives of the children on that continent.



Distribution of orange juice in Britain as part of a child welfare program sponsored by the Marshall Plan. (National Archives 286-MP-UK-306)



In Norway, the Marshall Plan helped with the construction of wooden houses to replace those destroyed during the war. (Harry S. Truman Library)



This year (1948) Denmark will enjoy the revival of its national dish, rice pudding at Christmas dinner. One thousand tons of rice have arrived in time to start rationing before the holidays. The Marshall Plan shipment is the first rice the Danes have had since before the war, nine years ago. (National Archives 286-MP-DEN-3)



Inger, aged five, is quite speechless at the delicious taste of her first real Danish Christmas pudding. (National Archives 286-MP-DEN-5)

Today, the McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program carries on the U.S. tradition of helping the world's children. This program, named for former Senators George McGovern and Bob Dole, provides school lunches to children in impoverished countries. Millions of children have benefited from these lunches, but many millions more go without.

Like the Marshall Plan of the late 1940s, the McGovern-Dole program is in need of adequate funding to truly maximize its potential. In 2007 the new Congress will have an opportunity to strengthen and grow this program.

How McGovern-Dole works is quite simple. A daily lunch is provided to every child who attends school in a participating country. For many children this is the only meal they receive the entire day. The benefits of having this school lunch are therefore enormous.

A child who eats will be healthier and better able to concentrate on school. Parents in poverty-stricken countries will be more likely to send their children to school with the promise of food aid. In some cases, take-home rations will bolster this.



The McGovern-Dole program reaches 3 million children. Worldwide there are 300 million children who suffer from hunger, 110 million of these are school age. (photo of school feeding in Ecuador WFP/Clive Shirley)

The benefits to America's image are also substantial. Take, for instance, school feeding programs in Afghanistan, a country in the front line of the war on terrorism. McGovern-Dole supports school lunch initiatives in Afghanistan, such as the one operated by the charity World Vision.

The McGovern-Dole program is an investment in the future of underprivileged countries. School lunches help fuel the education and future of children in these nations. But without increased and steady funding, millions of children will not be nourished.

Congress has a choice. It can vote to make certain that school feeding programs in Afghanistan and around the globe are strengthened and expanded. Or Congress can not make school feeding a priority and leave millions of children worldwide with one less ray of hope.

This article originally appeared in the Wichita Eagle (November 1, 2006) and later in the North Adams Transcript (MA) (November 20, 2006) and the Cincinnati Enquirer (December 1, 2006). For more information about the effort to expand the McGovern-Dole Global School Feeding Program, please visit www.friendsofwfp.org. An online petition to expand the program is posted on this site.



Take-home rations for students in Pakistan. The United Nations World Food Programme operates school feeding programs in Pakistan, some of which are supported by McGovern-Dole funding. (WFP/Farah Janjiva)



The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) reported in 2006 that its school feeding programmes in Afghanistan suffered a biscuit shortage due to a shortfall of wheat from the supplying nation India. The Indian government plans to restore full shipments of biscuits to Afghanistan in 2007. However, the United Nations is exploring ways to find alternative biscuit production in the event of future shortages of wheat in India. Expanding the McGovern-Dole initiative could offer additional support to the United Nations and its school feeding activities in Afghanistan. (photo credit: WFP/Alejandro Chicheri)



WFP plans to expand its school feeding in Pakistan to reach 525,000 in 2007. About 30,000 girls in middle schools will also receive take home rations.(photo credit: WFP 2006/Caroline Chaumont)

School Lunches for Kids Around the World: Hey, Why Not?

by William Lambers

In his first major foreign policy address in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called for "a declared total war...upon the brute forces of poverty and need." Eisenhower stated, "The peace we seek...can be fortified, not by weapons of war but by wheat and by cotton, by milk and by wool, by meat and by timber and by rice."

Today, the idea of an all-out war on global poverty needs to be an integral part of U.S. policy in our effort to seek peace in the 21st century. Defeating poverty has to begin by bringing hope and opportunity to children in impoverished countries. One way is to provide school lunches to these children to bolster their health and education. Many children in poorer countries struggle to receive one meal a day. School lunches can be a life-changing event for these youth.

During the Eisenhower administration the U.S. supported school lunch programs in Japan and Italy. These programs were part of a larger Food for Peace initiative which sent U.S. agricultural surplus abroad to help those in need. Eisenhower noted in 1959 that "Food can be a powerful instrument for all the free world in building a durable peace."

In 1956, the American ambassador to Italy, Clare Boothe Luce, described U.S. sponsored school lunch programs as "bringing home American generosity to about a million children throughout Italy." According to Luce, these programs were part of a U.S. policy that helped "sustain the confidence of Italians in America's friendship and world leadership."

Former Senator and Food for Peace director George McGovern wrote in 1964 that U.S. sponsored school lunch programs in Japan "added inches and pounds to the average size of Japanese youth." McGovern added that "Japanese school officials have been forced to install larger desks because the children of this generation are larger than their mothers and fathers."

During the Kennedy administration Food for Peace and school lunch programs were greatly expanded to help millions of children in nations such as Brazil, Peru, India and South Korea. It should be noted that India and Japan currently help fund food relief efforts in Afghanistan, including school lunch programs for Afghan children.

Today, the McGovern-Dole Global School Feeding Program is the U.S. mechanism for providing school lunches abroad. This program, named after former senators George McGovern and Robert Dole, provides school meals to children in impoverished countries. Organizations such as the UN World Food Program, World Vision, CARE and Food for the Poor carry out the school lunch distribution via McGovern-Dole funding.

These school lunches not only improve a child's nutrition and learning ability, they also provide the parents with incentive to send their kids to school. Take-home rations are also included in some of these school lunch programs. Combining food with education promotes healthier children in these developing countries.

The McGovern-Dole program currently reaches about 3 million children in Kenya, Pakistan, Guatemala, Afghanistan and other nations. But worldwide nearly 110 million school-age children suffer from hunger.

This year the Congress will decide whether to reauthorize and expand McGovern-Dole. They would be wise to do so. There is no greater act of public diplomacy the U.S. can undertake than to help feed and educate children abroad.

An expanded McGovern-Dole legislation could help the UN World Food Program provide more school lunches to children in Southern Sudan, a region recovering after decades of Civil War.

What about the children of Iraqi refugees living abroad in Egypt, Syria and Jordan? School lunch programs, complete with take-home rations, would help these refugee families. Such acts also benefit America's image abroad, which has suffered since the Iraq invasion.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, school lunch programs nourish children, keep them in school and away from potential terrorist recruiters.

School lunch programs are the investment in the future of children across the globe. This same investment will promote peace and progress in the developing world. Expanding the McGovern-Dole Global School Feeding program is one critical step in the war against hunger and poverty worldwide.

This article appeared on the History News Network web site in March of 2007 and on the Diplomatic Traffic web site in April of 2007.



Refugee children in Hong Kong drinking milk supplied by CARE. Photo from the early years of Food for Peace (National Archives 306-BNN-H-46507).

The charity International Relief and Development (IRD) helps distribute “fortified snack noodles, soy enriched bread and soy milk to primary school children” in Cambodia. This effort to boost school attendance in Cambodia is part of a larger “Food for Progress” funded project aimed at increasing production at Cambodian noodle producers and bakeries. The increased production helps produce more jobs for area residents.

Food for Progress is a U.S. government program that supports countries like Cambodia or Afghanistan that are trying to develop free market systems. Charities such as IRD or Catholic Relief Services carry out the projects. The Food for Progress program, like the McGovern-Dole initiative, is in need of expansion. Food for Progress projects help stimulate the economies of impoverished nations.

“An example of Food for Progress in action is its partnership with the charity FINCA, which is short for Foundation for International Community Assistance. FINCA provides small loans to entrepreneurs in impoverished countries through a system of village banks. Food for Progress donates agricultural products that FINCA sells in selected nations. The proceeds of the sales help fund the village bank loans. These loans give low-income individuals the golden opportunity to start their own small business, whether it is a fruit stand, sewing or making crafts. These tiny enterprises can be huge for the entrepreneur in terms of breaking out of poverty..... Congress would be wise to increase the amount of agricultural commodities allocated for Food for Progress. Such an investment in peace and progress abroad will, in the long run, also be very beneficial to the United States. As former Secretary of State George Marshall once wisely said: "We can act for our own good by acting for the world's good." (article by William Lambers, Cincinnati Enquirer, May 10, 2007)

The stimulation of local economies helps to strengthen communities which will, in turn, have positive effects on local schooling. Food for Progress projects, as cited earlier, can help provide school meals to children.



The World Food Programme plans to reach 450,000 children in Southern Sudan through school feeding programs. School feeding is essential to rebuilding the society of Southern Sudan, a region shattered by two decades of Civil War. A strengthened McGovern-Dole legislation can help fund school feeding in Sudan and elsewhere around the globe. In 2006 the WFP started a pilot school feeding project in North Darfur with plans for expansion. One can imagine school feeding playing an important role in building a peace in the Darfur region. (photo credit: WFP/Julia Stewart).

“Food is the very basis of all reconstruction. Hunger and insecurity are the worst enemies of peace.”

Secretary of State George C. Marshall
architect of the Marshall Plan
October 1st, 1947

The UN World Food Programme has sponsored school feeding programs within Iraq, where millions are suffering from hunger.

'Surge' of humanitarian aid needed in Iraq

(by William Lambers, August 23rd, 2007, Cincinnati Enquirer)

The hunger and poverty afflicting millions of Iraqis harm any peace efforts there. In July, the charity Oxfam International released a report citing 8 million Iraqis in desperate need of help.

Iraqi children, in particular, are suffering. The report showed that 28 percent of Iraqi children are malnourished, compared with 19 percent before the 2003 invasion. It is urgent that the international community increase humanitarian aid to Iraq.

Oxfam calls for the Iraqi government to expand its food and medicine distribution network to reach more of its citizens. Currently, Baghdad serves as the central warehouse location. But it is local authorities that should be given the ability to quality-check and distribute these necessities. Spreading warehouses across Iraq would speed distribution and allow for a safer dispersal of food and medicine.

Such planning is critical in a humanitarian crisis. Think back to World War II in 1945, when British and American planes air-dropped desperately needed food into the German-occupied section of the Netherlands. The Allies actually negotiated with the German leadership in the Netherlands to arrange additional food drops and truck deliveries via the Canadian army. These convoys used supplies stockpiled in a liberated section of the country. Amid the difficulties of war, food was pre-positioned and delivered to starving people.

The international community must also increase funding for charities operating within Iraq. UNICEF and the U.N. World Food Programme should receive more money to help Iraqi children.

Hunger and poverty in Iraq make the daunting task of building peace all the more difficult. Humanitarian aid must play a larger role in this peace process.

About the Author

William Lambers is the author of several books including “The Road to Peace: From the Disarming of the Great Lakes to the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.” His articles have been published by newspapers including the Chicago Sun-Times, the San Diego Union-Tribune, the Miami Herald (FL) and the Cincinnati Enquirer. Mr. Lambers is a graduate of the College of Mount St. Joseph in Ohio (BA, MSOL).

For more information about school feeding programs and the effort to increase congressional support please visit www.friendsofwfp.org

For more information about school lunch programs in Austria during 1945 please see “Report of the United States Commissioner, Military Government Austria. (November, 1945)

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