

Mary's Meals'
Covid-19 response

What we do

Mary's Meals works with local communities to set up school feeding programs in some of the world's poorest places, where poverty and hunger often prevent children from learning. The provision of daily meals encourages hungry children to come to school and gain an education that can offer them a route out of poverty.

Shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, we announced that our programs were providing life-changing meals every school day to **1,667,067** children at close to **3,000** places of education across **19** countries. Our monitoring and research studies demonstrated the positive impact our work was having with just some of the top-line results from our larger programs highlighted below.



The proportion of children finding it difficult to concentrate in class fell by

52%



Research findings from our impact assessments in Malawi, Zambia and Liberia.

For more information visit marysmeals.org

Working together during the Covid-19 pandemic

As the pandemic tightened its grip globally in March and April and schools had to close their doors, we questioned how we might be able to continue feeding the vulnerable children who count on our daily meals to help them thrive. It was clear that these children were especially vulnerable and at risk.

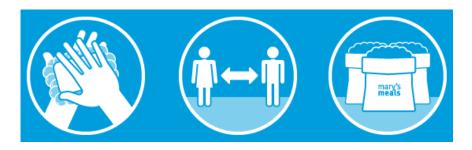
Miraculously, Mary's Meals' program staff, partners and volunteers swiftly devised and implemented a range of appropriate and safe community food distribution systems, in conjunction with local governments and the communities themselves.

This did not, of course, happen overnight – there were many obstacles and the logistics were complex – but with perseverance and an unwavering commitment to feeding the children, plans became reality and soon our community distribution programs were under way.

Our teams began to distribute food from central points to enable parents to safely collect food to cook for their children at home. We also provided guidance on social distancing, handwashing and essential hygiene practices so that families could better protect themselves against the spread of the virus, while distributing rations of soap to the majority of the children in our programs to encourage handwashing and good hygiene at home.

By adapting the programs so quickly and working with communities to deliver these vital supplies, Mary's Meals succeeded in continuing to feed more than 1.6 million children at home – their new place of education – at a time when vulnerable families most needed that vital support.

Our work will not stop. Still, we hear stories of hardship and hunger, and we know there are children we are yet to reach.



Keeping our promise

Amina Swedi, Country Director of Mary's Meals Kenya shares an insight into the challenges and achievements of the last few months:

"There was a lot of confusion and sadness at the start of the pandemic, especially for parents and guardians whose children depend on Mary's Meals for their only daily meal. In



Turkana County, children kept coming to school even after the closure because they could not stay at home with empty stomachs. They knew coming to school was the only way to get food. The quick turnaround to home rations by Mary's Meals was a big relief for many parents and communities.

"Conducting the distribution without experiencing any challenges of crowd control and pilfering was a major achievement. The team worked around the clock to ensure distribution in the four counties was well coordinated and anchored on a community-led approach. The exercise was led by School Feeding Committees, supporting School Feeding Officers to manage crowds and ensure all beneficiaries were reached.

"Market instability led to a hike in prices and this was a big challenge in terms of affordability. I am glad that Mary's Meals Kenya, with the support of Mary's Meals International, was able to negotiate with the suppliers, settling on a reasonable cost and ensuring we can keep our promise to all the children we currently support.

"Owing to the level of illiteracy and poverty in Turkana, our partnership with the Ministry of Health created a much-needed platform for awareness raising on Covid-19. Most of the population do not have technology to help relay Covid-19 precautionary guidelines. Our collaboration brought the teachings to their doorstep and now we can see communities taking precautionary measures as advised by WHO and the Ministry of Health.

"People feel assured of our commitment to the community and there is a better understanding of our program model, principles, and values. They now understand that the child is the centre of the program and that community involvement and ownership is at the heart of Mary's Meals.

"The future looks bright and we anticipate that trust with communities, schools and other stakeholders will be strengthened with wider participation, contribution, community ownership and program excellence."

Reaching even more children

Despite the challenging global context, we continue to grow the global movement and reach out to additional children in need of Mary's Meals.

In recent months, we have been able to support some extremely vulnerable communities where we have identified an immediate need for intervention. In the townships surrounding Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare, we have started supporting around 6,000 vulnerable children through Mavambo Orphan Care (MOC) — with whom we have many shared values and objectives. MOC is a local NGO that aims to empower orphans and vulnerable children to develop their maximum potential by providing a range of educational and health-related activities.

This collaboration is enabling us to distribute food to the children that MOC supports through its community health program. More than 5,000 of these children are living with HIV and require sufficient nutritional intake for their antiretroviral medication to be effective. Most of their guardians and caregivers rely on the informal sector for employment, which has



been hit hard by the restrictions introduced by the government to help combat Covid-19. As a result of lost income, many already vulnerable families have faced even greater challenges in providing enough food for their children. Through MOC, Mary's Meals is providing these children with food for a daily meal, offering a social safety net for families in these challenging times.

Nicole Machaya, 11, shared her experience:

"It has really affected me because my mother is no longer employed. We are always at home and it is difficult to get food. When we heard the meals would be distributed, I felt happy that I was going to get something to eat because my mother is not working and the living conditions are not good."



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"The food distribution is preventing hunger among schoolchildren, while the provision of soap and information on handwashing is playing a key role in preventing the spread of the virus."

Daughters of Charity, Mary's Meals' partner in Ethiopia

"During the school days these children look forward to this daily meal, so we want to continue to help our children in some way."

BREAD Noida, Mary's Meals' partner in India









"The feeding support was a source of hope and relief for the families. They were extremely appreciative, knowing that we went beyond what we would normally do to support them. This renewed our engagement with the communities and strengthened our relationship and trust."

Summits Education, Mary's Meals' partner in Haiti

"The majority of our children come from households with very limited access to a livelihood and the restrictions that were imposed led to the loss of their source of income to access basics including food. The worst hit, as is usually the case, are children. This is the gap that the dry rations addressed and it eased the burden for parents."

Panji Chipson Kajani, Country Director, Mary's Meals Zambia





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Stories from the communities we serve



Malawi

Judith and Phillip Nahawa live in Gawanya village in the Mulanje district of Malawi and are raising their seven children together. Like many in their community, they had to adapt to life under lockdown as schools and businesses closed throughout the country. Their eldest child is married, but the other six still live at home.

Judith told us: "When we heard that the Covid-19 pandemic was in Malawi, we were worried about our children's education. They want the chance to excel in their studies.

"We heard about the CSB (corn soya blend) distribution in the village. The chief's people went round the village, giving us a date to go to the school to receive phala flour for our children. They told us to listen out for our children's names as Mary's Meals had put in place a strategy for learners to receive porridge.

"We found them organized – they used a register to call out names and people were given meal cards. We were asked to wash our hands with soap and shown to a line, while observing social distancing. After receiving the rations, we were advised to go straight home.

"This development brought happiness to our children because, at the moment, it is impossible for learners to continue with the school feeding program at school. I hope Mary's Meals will continue engaging parents. We are committed to serving our children while they are at home.

"We also encourage our children to study at home and as a parent that is a must. Especially me, I don't tolerate these kids just playing around! I restrict them from going around to play due to the coronavirus, and I always advise them to study hard instead. They would love to go back to school as they used to, despite the Covid-19 pandemic.



"In most cases these children are able to assist one another, because there are learning areas that I cannot manage to assist them, but for simple subjects like vowels I come in handy!

"The little ones take a lot of time to concentrate. The other ones can study properly, but I see the little ones having an interest in studying as they follow their older brothers and sisters. I have seen the elder children assisting the young ones a number of times. It feels good to see them study.

"However, without food such as phala, a child cannot learn; they require food to gain knowledge. If they try to study without a meal, they just think about hunger over and over again. That can hinder a child from progressing – food is part and parcel of their studies.

"Even though schools are closed, our plea goes to Mary's Meals that they should not stop assisting the children with food distribution."

South Sudan

We caught up with Marie, a teacher in South Sudan, at one of the community food distributions. Speaking about the families turning up to receive the food parcels, she said: "They are now very happy because they see the food. Others, now they are spending two, three days without food. You find yourself [thinking] that you are going to die because of hunger, not coronavirus. We really thank you, because of the work you have done to encourage our people. Thank you, Mary's Meals!"

Moses Kopurot Kenyi from our partner organization in South Sudan, Diocese of Rumbek, added: "This food has been given to their parents as a take-home ration and it has really impacted the community. The parents have come to us and the schools to say words of thanks that we have at least helped them. It is like giving them hope and giving them life-saving food during this time of the coronavirus."

Lily Nyirongo, grandmother from Zambia

"Mary's Meals' food distribution has really helped our children to combat hunger.

"During the distribution there was order and we observed all the rules the government put in place to prevent the spread of coronavirus. We felt loved by Mary's Meals and we were filled with joy in our hearts."



The way ahead

The Covid-19 pandemic is still having a profound effect across the globe and since the number of cases varies greatly between countries, government approaches to schools returning also differ.

In many of the countries where we work, schools have already reopened or are taking steps to be able to do so soon, but the picture and timeline is very mixed. Through our program affiliates and partners, and in liaison with local authorities, we are working with communities to ensure compliance with local regulations and guidelines and allow school feeding to restart as smoothly and safely as possible.

For example, in Haiti, where schools reopened in August, we have worked with our partners to deliver Mary's Meals safely by providing masks for cooks, reviewing handwashing facilities and upgrading these facilities wherever necessary. Cassandre Regnier, Director of Programs for our partner Summits, in Haiti, said: "We are extremely grateful to have the opportunity to not only serve the students during the confinement but also to resume the school feeding program as soon as schools reopened. Many of the programs in Haiti have not started yet and might be even be postponed to next year."

In Zambia schools reopened in mid-September, under strict guidelines from the Ministries of Education and Health, following several months of closure. Mary's Meals Zambia (MMZ) is currently operating its full school feeding program in schools — reaching out to 194,650 children enrolled in 366 schools with daily meals.

In Malawi, Kenya and Liberia, where schools are either remaining closed or operating a phased return, our teams are continuing with community distributions of take-home rations to ensure every child relying on Mary's Meals has the chance of a daily meal.

In this ever-changing situation, we will continue to work closely with program affiliate staff and partners to support the reinstatement of inschool feeding as soon as possible. While taking the utmost care to incorporate the measures stipulated by local governments and ensure the safety of all those involved in the programs, we look forward to welcoming children back to the classroom where the daily meals we serve will help them to learn and thrive.



A message from our founder

The closure of schools around the world in March was a low point in the Mary's Meals journey. It was hard to immediately see a way forward. We found ourselves thinking of the various children we know who eat Mary's Meals and who would now be without. While it was possible to understand why those children were temporarily being denied their education for the good of their nation, it was impossible to accept the idea of them also being denied their daily meal. Especially because for many of them that is what Mary's Meals is – their one daily meal, often representing a very large proportion of what they eat.

Very quickly things began to shift, though – simply because the Mary's Meals family refused to accept there was no way forward. Many voices were raised in prayer whilst others talked to community leaders and public health authorities – and very quickly solutions were found.

In one country after another, a new model was designed and implemented incredibly quickly, which enabled food to be collected at our school stores and taken home for cooking.

And thus, we have kept our promise to the little ones, even in these dark times and in the face of what, at first, appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. In many ways it feels like a miracle – one that can only be sustained by the continued outpouring of the little acts of love on which this mission relies. More than ever, we need to remind people of the continuing needs of those little ones in far-away places and plead with them, despite their own hardships, to not forget them.

Although the global pandemic has created uncertainty and an ever-shifting landscape, we remain true to our vision. As schoolchildren begin to return to classrooms in some of the countries where we work and others remain at home, we stay focused on the hungry child and our promise to them. Thank you for helping us to fulfil that promise; thank you for sharing our vision that no child should endure a day without a meal.

Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, founder of Mary's Meals

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