

Local farmers in Africa to benefit from school meal programmes

A new project that aims to both help local farmers in sub-Saharan Africa and to provide healthy school meals for local children launches today. The project, run by the Partnership for Child Development at Imperial College London, is supported in part by a \$12 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The programme will help governments to run school meal programmes using locally-sourced food, providing regular orders and a reliable income for local farmers. While many countries in sub-Saharan Africa already have school meal programmes in place, these programmes are traditionally run by international aid agencies, mostly using imported food. The new initiative will work in conjunction with education, health and agricultural sectors, social workers and international development partners, such as the World Bank and the World Food Programme.

Smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of whom are women, can often find it difficult to earn enough money to feed their families. They typically have small patches of land where they are only able to grow small amounts or poor quality food because they cannot afford modern seeds and fertilisers, and lack access to a regular and lucrative market to sell their goods.

“By putting school feeding programmes using locally-sourced food in place, we can ensure that the smallholder farmers who supply the food get a reliable income that helps them look after their families and improve their businesses. We want to give them the skills and know-how to shape their own futures and beat poverty,” said Dr Lesley Drake, project lead, from the Partnership for Child Development at Imperial College London.

Through the new project, the Partnership aims to ensure a reliable and fair market for local farmers' products. The project will work with African governments and local partners to identify and provide the information, expertise, and training smallholder farmers will need in order to produce nutritious foods in the right quantity and quality for the school meal programmes.

The first countries expected to benefit from the project will be Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi and Kenya. In addition to helping governments run school meal programmes, the project will also be conducting a series of studies to analyse their cost and impact. Previous studies have suggested that government-led school meal programmes can improve rural economies and create jobs and profits in addition to providing healthy food and improving access to education for children. The researchers hope to build on these case studies to produce an accurate picture of the impact of school meal programmes on farmers and children.

According to the UN, more than 60 million children go to school hungry every day worldwide. Research has shown that providing free, nutritious school lunches can improve children's health, giving them an incentive to enrol in classes and improve their attendance at school. Studies have also shown that school meals can improve children's concentration and learning ability.

Dr Drake said: "Millions of school children are facing poverty and hunger every day. For many of them, a school meal is the only reliable, nutritious meal they get each day and it is often the reason they go to school. Getting an education is really important for these kids, as it helps them to get jobs and break out of the poverty cycle. We hope our new project will help governments make sure these children are fed and educated.

This grant is part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Agricultural Development initiative, which is working with a wide range of partners to provide millions of small farmers in the developing world with tools and opportunities to boost their yields, increase their incomes, and build better

lives for themselves and their families. The foundation is working to strengthen the entire agricultural value chain—from seeds and soil to farm management and market access—so that progress against hunger and poverty is sustainable over the long term.

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Notes to Editors:

1. Partnership for Child Development

Partnership for Child Development (PCD) is part of the Division of Epidemiology, Public Health and Primary Care at Imperial College London. PCD is a global consortium of civil society organisations, academic institutions and technical experts committed to improving the education, health and nutrition of school-age children and youth in low and middle income countries.

PCD's ongoing research and operational activities in the field of school health and nutrition and HIV/AIDS and education provide an evidence-based platform that assists countries and international agencies turn such findings into national interventions.

PCD is recognized internationally for its focus on quality science in development and this work has shown how simple health and nutrition

interventions, implemented through schools can improve not only children's physical wellbeing, but also their education and life choices.

www.child-development.org

www.schoolsandhealth.org

www1.imperial.ac.uk/medicine/about/divisions/ephpc/ide/research_groups/pc_d_ide/

2. About Imperial College London

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Innovative research at the College explores the interface between science, medicine, engineering and business, delivering practical solutions that improve quality of life and the environment - underpinned by a dynamic enterprise culture.

Since its foundation in 1907, Imperial's contributions to society have included the discovery of penicillin, the development of holography and the foundations of fibre optics. This commitment to the application of research for the benefit of all continues today, with current focuses including interdisciplinary collaborations to improve health in the UK and globally, tackle climate change and develop clean and sustainable sources of energy.

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