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Mary's Meals Significantly Expands School Feeding Program in Tigray, Ethiopia

In a region at risk for starvation, Mary's Meals responds with its unique school-feeding model to reach 110,000 children.

Bloomfield, N.J. – August 13 , 2024 – Mary's Meals announces a significant expansion of its school-feeding program in Tigray, Ethiopia, in response to the urgent need as the region faces widespread hunger and an education crisis. The global school-feeding charity has increased the number of vital meals it serves every school day and now reaches more than 110,000 children in 200 schools.

Although the number of children receiving school meals in the region is significantly higher than before, the need for such interventions remains acute. Much of Tigray is projected to face crisis and emergency levels of hunger through September, with over two million Tigrayans at risk of starvation and millions more suffering from food insecurity. Alongside pervasive hunger, another crisis is gripping Tigray as an estimated 700,000 children whose education was disrupted by war remain out of school.

Last year, Mary's Meals in-country partner, the Daughters of Charity, reintroduced basic school feeding for 10,000 children in 14 schools, soon scaling the program to feed 45,000 children. Working with Mary's Meals, they have more than doubled that reach to provide meals to 110,000 children in 200 schools in Tigray. School meals bring children back to classrooms to resume their education, receive a nutritious meal, and help prevent malnutrition and sickness.

The charity's unique school-feeding model, which is embedded in communities and relies on local volunteers, not only provides children with essential sustenance but also encourages access to education. In Tigray, Mary's Meals is operating as a support system for communities as they work to rebuild their lives following two years of deadly civil war.

In the Hintalo Wajirat District of Tigray, Ara Primary School is one rural school where Mary's Meals introduced its feeding program in recent months. Before school feeding began, teachers, parents and students struggled daily to find enough food to eat. Fitsum, the mother of 11-year-old Aradech, a student at Ara Primary School, said, "We are living with hunger. We only have this piece of bread or some soup. We don't satisfy ourselves. We are surviving just with this. The problem now is the shortage of rain consecutively for three years. This repeated seasonal problem is causing great hunger—even death. It is not just [happening to] me; it is not only [happening in] my village; it's all over Tigray."

Fitsum and the community around Ara Primary School have worked diligently to implement the new school-feeding program to address the critical need for lifesaving food among children and families. They constructed a rudimentary outside kitchen to allow the program to start as quickly as possible, created a shaded area where the children can eat, and organized a roster of volunteers to cook and serve the nutritious porridge-like meal.

"I feel joyful now that we have school feeding. Before it started, I always had a headache at school from hunger. Now I feel happy, and we have the energy for learning, even for jumping rope. It has made such a difference at school," said Aradech.

Sister Medhin Tesfay, who leads Mary's Meals partner organization, the Daughters of Charity in Tigray, described the current situation and why work must continue to reach those who are most vulnerable.

"During the two years of war, nearly the entire population became dependent on food and all basic needs. Currently, according to credible sources, we have 4.5 million people dependent on food aid. Unless we work together, there is a high possibility of losing so many people. It's vital—critical—that the emergency support people are very much in need of is provided," she stated.

Alex Keay, Director of Programs at Mary's Meals, said, "The fact that we received such an incredible response to our crisis appeal and have been able to expand our program in Tigray so rapidly is a testament to how highly respected our partner is, as well as the capability and determination of our Tigrayan colleagues and the communities they work alongside."

He added, "During recent visits to the region, we met children who have so little to eat that they are too lethargic to attend classes and parents who have had to choose which of their children will receive food from the tiny rations available to them. We know that for many children, the school meals we provide are all they will eat in a day. Mary's Meals will continue to work with its global movement of supporters and volunteers to feed more children in Tigray. We will not stop until we are no longer needed."

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About Mary's Meals

Now in its 22nd year, Mary's Meals is a global movement that sets up school-feeding programs in some of the world's most vulnerable communities, where conflict, poverty and hunger often prevent children from gaining an education. Mary's Meals works with in-country volunteers and trusted partners to provide one daily nutritious meal in a place of learning to bring children into the classroom to receive an education. This simple solution to help end world hunger also enables children to lift themselves from the cycle of hunger and poverty.

Mary's Meals began by feeding 200 children in Malawi in 2002. Today, the organization feeds more than 2.4 million children every school day in more than 5,000 schools in the following countries: Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Mary's Meals is part of the global School Meals Coalition, an emerging initiative of governments and partners to drive actions that can urgently reestablish, improve, and scale up food and education systems. For more information about Mary's Meals, visit marysmealsusa.org.

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