

A Journey Through WF-AID's Fill My Cup and the Power of Breakfast Provision in the Global South

Introduction

A balanced diet and the proper nutrition are fundamental necessities for young children to develop both mentally and physically. Despite this, one in four children worldwide face uncertainty about their next meal (Demeter, 2025), meaning millions of children are forced to partake in their daily activities on an empty stomach. Over time, this contributes to increasing rates of malnutrition and stunted growth. In the context of education, a lack of access to nutritious food reduces a student's ability to concentrate in class and to achieve academic success. Additionally, the challenge of hunger also acts as a barrier to participation in academic activities. In the Global South, the combination of poor performance and low attendance is a leading cause of the endless cycle of poverty that affects over 600 million families (World Bank, 2024).

School feeding programs have emerged as an effective intervention to tackle the hunger pandemic head on. These initiatives build on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, more specifically "No Poverty", "Zero Hunger", and "Quality Education" (United Nations, 2025). Feeding programs ensure children receive the nourishment required to thrive during their formative years. By addressing a child's immediate hunger, there is an opportunity to improve attendance and achievement in academic activities. Therefore, these programs have the ability to fuel economic activities and well-being on a mass scale in the Global South.

The *Fill My Cup* program, implemented by WF-AID, serves as a compelling case

study for the success of feeding initiatives. The data shows that feeding initiatives can transform education outcomes for underprivileged students. By providing highly nutritious cups of porridge daily, *Fill My Cup* directly tackles hunger and supports a child's ability to engage with learning.

This article will explore *Fill My Cup's* project implementation, impact, and prospects, situating it within global efforts to combat childhood hunger and improve access to quality education. By examining both quantitative data and testimonials, this article aims to highlight the critical role of school feeding programs in fostering sustainable development and social equity.

The Ethics and Virtue of Feeding Others in Islamic Tradition

Beyond its practical impact, *Fill My Cup* is deeply rooted in Islamic principles of charity and social responsibility. The Holy Quran emphasises the virtue of feeding those in need, stating:

“And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive” (Quran, 76:8)

This verse highlights the moral and Islamic responsibility of righteous individuals in addressing food insecurity - *Fill My Cup* is not only a humanitarian effort, but also a fulfilment of religious values. A remarkable example of this ethos is found in the actions of the Ahlulbayt.

According to the narrations, when Imam Hassan (as) and Imam Hussain (as) fell ill, Imam Ali (as) and Lady Fatima (as) vowed to fast for three days if their children recovered (Al-Islam.org, 2014). While facing extreme hunger over those three days, they were visited each night by an indigent person, an orphan, and a captive all seeking sustenance. The household generously gave away their only food, breaking their fast with nothing but water. This act of sacrifice from the Ahlulbayt exemplifies the deep-rooted Islamic principle that true generosity lies not in giving from abundance, but in giving during times of

personal hardship. . The *Fill My Cup* program embodies this spirit of sacrifice and care by ensuring vulnerable children receive the nourishment essential for cognitive development and growth, learning and long-term wellbeing.

The Islamic principles of *Sadaqah* and *Infaq* uphold values of compassion, social justice and community responsibility – especially in addressing hunger and inequality. *Sadaqah*, or voluntary charity, is highly encouraged in Islam as a means of purifying one’s wealth and supporting the vulnerable. It is narrated that the Prophet (saw) said, “*Whoever feeds three Muslims, Allah will feed him from three gardens in the Kingdom of Heaven: the garden of al-Firdaws, the garden of Eden, and Tuba,*” illustrating the immense spiritual reward associated with feeding others (Al-Islam.org, 2014). Similarly, *Infaq* refers to any act of giving in the way of Allah, not limited to financial donations, but encompassing all efforts to ease the hardships of others. Feeding hungry children, therefore, is a powerful act of both *Sadaqah* and *Infaq* – one that nourishes not only bodies, but souls.

The spiritual imperative is beautifully embodied in the *Fill My Cup* program. Through the provision of daily school meals, the initiative allows donors to fulfil these principles by actively participating in a cause that uplifts young lives. By contributing to the nourishment and education of children, supporters of the program align their charitable giving with divine guidance – transforming a simple act of feeding into an investment in the future of society.

The Global Struggle Between Hunger and Education

Childhood hunger is not a phenomenon limited to a few countries, it remains a global issue. In 2023, nearly 282 million people across 59 countries experienced high levels of acute hunger – an increase of 24 million people compared to the previous year (Shetty, 2024). This crisis is further exacerbated by the fact that hunger disproportionately affects children. Over 36 million children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition in 32 countries (UNICEF, 2024). These figures clearly illustrate that the world needs a structure which helps

conquer the difficulties in childhood nutrition.

Without intervention, the direct impact will appear in both the short-term and long-term health of children. However, the ramifications of hunger will also extend beyond health, significantly undermining educational attainment. Statistical analyses have proven that hunger adversely affects one's concentration, and therefore, impacts academic performance and classroom behaviour. Studies indicate that 80% of teachers in low-income communities have observed hunger negatively impacting student concentration, 76% have noted decreased academic performance, and 62% have reported increased behavioural issues amongst hungry students (No Kid Hungry, 2023).

While hunger is a global phenomenon the occurrence is highly concentrated in the Global South, particularly in Africa. Kenya's population faces extreme levels of hunger, with 34.5% of the population undernourished and 17.6% of the child population under five experiencing stunted growth (Wanzala, 2025). Tanzania faces similar difficulties, with over 20% of the population undernourished (World Bank, 2023), and home to the third highest population of stunted growth amongst children in Sub-Saharan Africa (Joseph et al., 2019).

The severity of childhood hunger demands urgent and sustained intervention. Feeding programs are a critical solution for breaking the cycle of hunger and ensuring children receive the nutrition necessary for their physical and cognitive development. Without such programs, millions of children will continue to suffer from malnutrition, impairing their health and depriving them of the opportunity to succeed academically and build a better future.

Recognising the dire need, WF-AID has implemented the *Fill My Cup* program to directly combat child hunger in vulnerable communities. By providing highly nutritious meals daily to school children, the program ensures they receive the nourishment necessary to focus in class, improve academic performance, and reduce absenteeism. This initiative exemplifies a sustainable and impactful approach to addressing hunger while also fostering educational growth, reinforcing the necessity of global efforts to prioritise school feeding programs

as a fundamental step towards a hunger free future.

WF-AID's Fill My Cup: A Model for Change

The *Fill My Cup* program was launched by WF-AID in direct response to the alarming rates of child hunger and its detrimental impact on education. Recognising that millions of children attend school on an empty stomach, hindering their ability to concentrate and succeed academically, WF-AID set out to create a sustainable solution that bridges the gap between food security and educational attainment. The program is rooted in the fundamental belief that no child should be forced to learn while hungry, and that access to proper nutrition is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty.

By providing free daily breakfasts to school children in underprivileged communities, *Fill My Cup* aims to improve school attendance, enhance concentration, and support overall academic performance. This initiative not only addresses immediate hunger but also promotes long-term educational development, empowering children with the opportunity to build a better future.

Fill My Cup operates through a structured model that ensures schoolchildren receive a nutritious meal at the start of each day. The program targets low-income and food insecure communities where malnutrition and school absenteeism are widespread. In collaboration with local partners and schools, WF-AID facilitates the distribution of meals and eliminates the logistical challenges that often prevent children from accessing adequate nutrition. Providing food within the school environment serves as a strong incentive for parents to send their children to school regularly, thereby improving attendance rates. The initiative is designed to be sustainable and cost effective, thriving off grassroots engagement to ensure long-term continuity of meal provisions. By prioritising locally sourced food items and implementing a streamlined distribution system, WF-AID maximises the impact of each meal, reinforcing the critical link between nourishment and educational success.

In East Africa, a typical diet found in a family's home consists of a variety of locally available foods. The diet is largely plant-based, supplemented with animal proteins, such as beef, chicken, goat, fish, eggs, milk and dairy, when available (Oldways – Cultural Food Traditions, 2024).

To ensure familiarity and cultural relevance, Fill My Cup sought to mirror a staple diet commonly consumed in local households. The program provides a traditional porridge called *Uji Ya Wimbi* in Kenya or *Uji Wa Ulezi* in Tanzania. This is made by mixing millet flour with milk and simmering it to a smooth consistency, while adding sugar to enhance the taste of it (Rose, 2023). This porridge is highly nutritious, offering a rich source of fibre, iron, and essential micronutrients, which provide sustained energy throughout the school day. It is easily digestible, making it suitable for young children, and keeping them satiated for longer periods of time, reducing hunger during lessons.

In the program's implementation, WF-AID recognised the opportunity to enhance the provision of millet porridge by making it with fresh milk from the local markets. This is used in replacement of powdered milk that many families of the program are used to using. By using fresh milk, it provides a much creamier and rich taste to the porridge, delivering more enjoyment and fulfillment to the children.

The provision of millet porridge in the *Fill My Cup* program is cost-effective due to being locally sourced, making it a sustainable choice for school feeding initiatives. Since millet is widely grown in East Africa, sourcing it locally supports the small-scale farmers and uplifts local economies while reducing logistical costs associated with imported food products. This approach ensures that the program not only addresses childhood hunger but also contributes to economic growth in the communities it serves. Furthermore, because millet can be grown in hot or cold conditions, it provides a sustainable food source that can be grown year-round and can be relied upon in droughts or food shortages.

The Science of Nourishment and Childhood Development

Scientific research consistently demonstrates a strong link between nutrition and cognitive function, particularly in children. For the brain to develop properly, there needs to be a steady and consistent supply of essential nutrients into the body. Supporting this nutritional foundation will enhance a child's capacity to learn. Furthermore, a well balanced diet plays a crucial role in strengthening memory, enabling children to absorb and retain information more effectively (Hoyland, Dye and Lawton, 2009).

One of the most critical nutrients for brain function is glucose, the brain's primary source for energy. This is especially important for school-aged children, whose brains are undergoing rapid growth and development. Neuroimaging studies have shown that the glucose consumption rate in the brain peaks between the ages of four and ten, exceeding even adult levels. This heightened demand reflects intense neural activity during a period when children are highly responsive to learning and environmental stimuli (Chugani, 1998). A steady intake of carbohydrates, such as those found in millet porridge, provides a slow-releasing source of glucose, sustaining mental clarity and cognitive function throughout the school day. Research consistently shows that children who eat breakfast outperform their peers in tasks involving memory, attention, and problem-solving (Hoyland, Dye and Lawton, 2009). These findings reinforce the importance of school feeding programs, which play a vital role in supporting cognitive development by ensuring children are not only nourished but biologically prepared to learn.

Millet is particularly beneficial for children as it is naturally high in calcium and proteins, both essential for healthy bone development- and iron, which prevents anemia, a common condition amongst malnourished students (Jessimy, 2024). By incorporating iron-rich and nutrient-rich foods such as millet in the *Fill My Cup* program, WF-AID actively combats anemia and its negative impact on learning.

Beyond immediate cognitive benefits, proper nutrition also has a significant impact on long-term academic success. Studies have shown that children who receive regular, nutrient-dense meals are more likely to remain in school, achieve higher grades, and develop better social behaviours. One contributing factor is that the provision of daily breakfast provides an incentive for families to send their children to school – it reduces the financial burden on the parents and removes the stress of having to provide one more meal every day (WF-AID, 2024). In contrast, chronic malnutrition is associated with reduced school attendance, lower engagement, and an increased risk of dropping out. Addressing food insecurity through breakfast provisions not only enhances day to day classroom performance, but also provides a foundation for lifelong educational and economic opportunities.

The *Fill My Cup* program significantly improves a child's diet by providing vital nutrients needed to maintain a balanced diet. While meals prepared at home attempt to meet the basic food security needs, they often lack the necessary micronutrients required for effective cognitive development. The provision of millet porridge through the program delivers glucose, fibre, iron, calcium, B Vitamins, protein and healthy fats – optimal for growth, immunity and cognitive function. This contributes to a well-rounded and balanced diet that supports both immediate and long-term well being.

Measuring the Transformative Impact of Fill My Cup

Over the years, WF-AID has collected compelling evidence that providing breakfasts in school not only addresses the food insecurity of young children but also plays a pivotal role in enhancing learning outcomes and reducing absenteeism.

Empirical data collected first hand from schools participating in the *Fill My Cup* program reveals substantial positive impacts amongst key educational indicators. In 2024, the program delivered over 700,000 meals to over 5,000 beneficiaries across 17 regions in Kenya and Tanzania (WF-AID, 2024), with

demonstrable effects. Students participating in the program achieved a grade “A” or “Meeting Expectation” on average, and an average attendance of 94% (WF-AID, 2024).

In the context of WF-AID’s *Fill My Cup*, an econometric analysis was conducted in an attempt to reveal a significant causal relationship between breakfast provisions and two key outcomes: (1) academic achievement and (2) attendance. The study revealed a weak, but positive relationship when exploring the correlation between breakfast provision and student grades or attendance. It was also revealed that there was a low statistical significance of the data set. Therefore, this should not be interpreted as a lack of a relationship between the variables. Instead, it reflects the complexity of educational outcomes and the limitations of isolating single-variable effects in real-world settings. There are likely other factors impacting the student performance and attendance, which would be difficult to measure. Examples of other factors impacting student performance include, but are not limited to: , the provision of free transport to school, the quality of education, the variation of foods provided to the students throughout the day, socioeconomic background, and gender.

As such, it is evident that a quantitative analysis does not reveal a comprehensive picture. While metrics such as attendance rates, test scores, and meal counts are essential for evaluation, they are often influenced by multiple variables, and often fail to account for the social, emotional, and environmental factors that shape a child’s experience and development. To supplement the quantitative success of the *Fill My Cup* program, qualitative data collected from students, parents and teachers offers powerful insights into the lived experiences of those directly impacted by the initiative. A thematic analysis of over a dozen testimonials reveals consistent patterns affirming the program’s multidimensional effectiveness in addressing both educational and nutritional challenges faced by children from low-income households.

One of the most prominent themes highlighted across the testimonies was the improvement in school attendance. Multiple students and parents described the daily porridge as a motivating factor for attending school consistently. As one

teacher from the Jaffery Madrasah in Kenya noted, the *Fill My Cup* program “provides an added incentive to attend school, therefore reducing absenteeism for this child and his peers” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2023). Another testimony shared that “she makes it a point to attend school and madrasah, knowing that she will be able to satiate her hunger when she receives her cup of porridge” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2023). For many children, this meal is the first or only reliable source of nutrition, transforming school from a place of obligation into a place of sustenance and hope.

In addition to improved attendance, the program has also led to noticeable enhancements in children’s physical health and energy levels, as observed by their educators. A teacher from Dembwa Bilal Centre in Kenya remarked, “This program has truly helped our students become more active in class and in all school activities. During outdoor activities, they interact and play energetically, and this is because of the energy they get from this program” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2024). Another parent noted, “This program has really helped my child grow healthy” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2024), referring to their daughter’s visible physical development since the program began.

This increase in energy and nourishment also translated into better academic performance and classroom engagement. A testimony from a parent identified that their daughter, who used to be shy and introverted became “more confident in interaction with fellow students both during lessons and extracurricular activities” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2023).

This program also brings emotional relief and economic support by targeting vulnerable families in genuine need of assistance. Several guardians shared that the provision of porridge alleviates the pressure of having to provide breakfasts themselves. A grandmother of an orphaned child, who now cares for him after the loss of both his parents, shared, “The only meals I now need to provide for my grandson are lunch and dinner, with breakfast being taken care of by the school” (Bilal Muslim Mission, 2024). These voices underscore one of the program’s broader implications, easing the financial and emotional tolls on underprivileged families.

This body of qualitative evidence affirms that *Fill My Cup* is more than just a feeding initiative, it is a catalyst for sustainable educational engagement, enhanced wellbeing, and community upliftment. As children become healthier, more focused, and socially integrated, they are better equipped to succeed academically and contribute meaningfully to their communities. These first-hand narratives humanise the program's impact and highlighting its role in restoring dignity, opportunity, and hope to some of the most vulnerable segments of society.

Conclusion

The *Fill My Cup* program has demonstrated that feeding a child is not just a charitable act – it is an investment in human potential. From improved attendance and academic achievement to enhanced health, confidence, and emotional wellbeing, the program's impact extends far beyond the classroom.

By addressing a root cause of inequality, it ensures that no child is forced to learn on an empty stomach, and no parent is burdened with choosing between food and education.

The success of this initiative in Kenya and Tanzania has affirmed a vital truth – that access to the correct nutrition is a foundational right, unlocking access to education and brighter futures. By delivering a simple cup of nutritious porridge each morning, the program delivers a possible path out of poverty.

However, hunger is not bound by borders. Similar challenges are faced by millions of school children in other parts of the world, such as in Pakistan, where malnutrition and school dropout rates remain high in underprivileged communities. The next chapter of WF-AID's Brighter Futures campaign (the parent campaign of *Fill My Cup*) includes a strategic expansion into these contexts – building on lessons learned, adapting to local dietary needs, and working closely with grassroots partners to reach the children most in need.

Now is the time to act, you have the power to change a child's life with a single meal. With just £5 a month, you can ensure one child receives a nutritious

breakfast every school day. You can donate directly at www.donate/fmc. Every pound (£) you give supports a child who might otherwise go hungry. Your generosity replaces hunger with energy, worry with focus, and uncertainty with possibility.

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