

School milk programs and cooperation with governments

Abstract of speech

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School milk programmes are complex and have many stakeholders. Needless to say, the most important stakeholders are the children – the very beneficiaries of all the efforts behind a school milk programme. Hopefully, the milk provided at school will improve or maintain their nutritional status, encourage them to attend school and improve academically. Support is sometimes provided by nutritionists, medical staff, teachers and other school staff to make a school milk programme successful. Other obvious stakeholders are the dairy farmers, the dairies and their suppliers.

So, who should be paying for the milk? Sometimes the provision of milk at school is paid for by the parents. In many countries, however, school milk is dependent on the availability of funds from other sources.

The government is an obvious stakeholder and also a potential source of financing. The problem is often how to convince the politicians to fund a school milk project. What would make the government permit school feeding to take a few steps forward on its list of priorities? What would be more important than to safeguard the physical and mental growth of the next generation? It is common knowledge that regular consumption of milk at school provides children with important nutrients, that many children leave home in the morning without a proper breakfast to the detriment of concentration at school and thus hampering their learning capabilities.

Another factor should also be taken into account by the government: increased demand for milk will promote rural development. Milk production in developing countries is labour intensive. Several countries have initiated school milk projects to increase the demand for milk which has then provided thousands of jobs in rural areas alleviating the pressure on the big cities by job-seekers from rural areas. Job creation and the development of the dairy sector are important secondary benefits of school milk programmes.

So, where is the starting point to get funds from the government for school milk? The answer is: COMMUNICATION. Start the work by identifying the key individuals in a future decision on school milk funding. Not only the ministries involved, but the key individuals within these ministries. Find out as much as possible about them: have they been involved in other similar projects? With whom are they working? To whom do they listen? What do they read? Do they take an active interest in education, agri-development, nutrition? Then develop your communications plan: how, where and when can we reach these individuals? To which messages will they listen? Personal contacts (lobbying) are usually more effective than written or printed messages or communication via mass media, but none should be excluded in the communications plan. Include representatives from media in your communications target groups – in most countries media has a profound influence, also on politicians. In several instances a small survey showing the nutritional deficiencies among school children has had a crucial effect: the problem in black and white. A glass of milk every day at school may mitigate the problem! Perhaps university students can be encouraged to write a thesis on the effect of an expanded dairy sector – again a source of information from someone without any vested interest. In any case, in a proposal to the government, don't get bogged down in too many details but try to explain how the programme will work and its anticipated effects.

If the funding is accepted and the programme is moving ahead, don't discontinue the communication efforts. Provide facts on the programme, give progress reports, send specimens of promotional material. A package of school milk to key individuals will create attention and surprise and will give recipients hands-on experience of the project. Particularly those who have provided funds for a project are pleased to be kept abreast of its development. Also, politicians and government officials are human and will be pleased to know that their contribution to the programme has served its purpose. Remember to address your communications to individuals, not to 'Ministry so-and-so'.

Finally, dealing with governments takes time – there are many 'we have not yet decided', 'we need more information', 'we will have to wait until after the election', 'the budget is not yet finalised' etc. Be prepared for hurdles, have PATIENCE.

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