

Welcome to As It Is, your daily magazine show from VOA Learning English.

I'm June Simms.

Today we hear about two studies on childhood hunger and its effects on educational development and the world economy.

We begin with a story out of Dakar, Senegal.

School Lunch Important for Health and Education

Educators in low-income areas everywhere struggle with one of the most basic barriers to teaching children -- hungry students. The United Nations World Food Program says in its 2013 State of School Feeding Worldwide report that supplying meals and snacks to students has proven valuable. Researchers in Dakar, Senegal agree. They found that supplying free lunches to students in rural primary schools not only made them healthier, it raised their test scores. Avi Arditti has more.

During the 2009-2010 academic year, researchers in Senegal did an experiment. They selected 120 rural primary schools in four of the poorest areas of the country. Students at half the schools received free, daily lunches -- a local dish of rice with vegetables and either fish or meat, cooked in oil. Students at the other 60 schools did not receive meals.

Abdoulaye Diagne is the director of the Consortium for Social Economic Research in Dakar. He led the study.

He says students who received school meals were better able to memorize and reason. He says they learned and understood more than those students who did not receive meals.

The study found that standardized test scores went up an average of 7 percentage points in French and 8.5 percentage points in math. The effect was even greater for girls and for the youngest students.

The World Food Program says that about \$75 billion goes into school feeding programs each year worldwide. Most of this money comes from governments.

However, the WFP says only 18 percent of children in the poorest countries receive a daily meal at school. This compares to nearly half of children in middle-income countries.

Bettina Luescher is with the World Food Program.

“School meals are a crucially important part and play a huge role in schools around the world. It means, in practicality, kids can concentrate.

They can study. They stay in school. They will send their own children to school one day. Girls will have fewer children if they have school meals and an education; they marry at a later stage. And there’s a huge impact on how they grow up to become strong, smart adults.”

Luescher says that school feeding programs also help protect children from crises -- like droughts, war, or sudden increases in food prices.

“School meals are a way of keeping children in school. It’s often the only way that families can afford to keep their children fed.

Sometimes it's the only meal that some of these children get."

The big problem, of course, is cost. This is especially true in low-income countries.

However, the WFP estimates that for every dollar spent on a school meal, countries will see three dollars in economic returns. Local farmers, for example, can sell their food to the school meal programs, and the country can build a smarter workforce. I'm Avi Arditti.

And I'm June Simms. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Effects of Childhood Malnutrition Far Reaching and Lasting

About one-quarter of the world's children may underperform at school because of poor nutrition. So says a new report from the Britain-based charity Save the Children.

The "Food for Thought" report says a malnourished child is almost

20 percent more likely to have trouble reading than someone of the same age who has a good diet.

David McNair is head of growth, equity and livelihoods at Save the Children UK.

“Those who are malnourished consistently have scored lower on math tests and find it more difficult to read a simple sentence at age eight. And as they go through life that affects their confidence, their career aspirations and ultimately their ability to earn money.”

The report is based on an international study of childhood poverty. Researchers from the University of Oxford are leading the “Young Lives” study. They are following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam over a 15-year period.

The report notes that the period from when a woman becomes pregnant until a child is two years old is an important time for brain development. But McNair says the effect of malnutrition

goes beyond the biology of the brain.

“There is interesting evidence on the stimulus that children receive. So because children who are malnourished look smaller, their parents and their caregivers tend to treat them as if they were younger than they are. And that means they do not get the right stimulus and their brains are not developing as a result of that stimulus.”

The report says childhood malnutrition is also a major threat to the long-term economic growth of many developing countries.

United Nations figures suggest that last year nearly 50 percent of children under five in southern Asia were stunted, too short for their age because of poor nutrition. This was also the case for 40 percent of children under five in sub-Saharan Africa.

Save the Children predicts that malnourished children may, as adults, earn 20 percent less than children who were properly fed. It says this costs the global economy more than \$100 billion a year.

McNair says targeting malnutrition now will have major long-term effects. But, currently nutrition programs get just over 0.3 percent of global development spending. Save the Children wants spending on nutrition to more than double to \$1 billion a year.

Earlier this week, the British and Brazilian governments held the first-ever

high-level nutrition pledging conference. They say it is a first step in moving malnutrition to a higher level as an important economic and social development issue.

I'm June Simms in Washington and that is As It Is for today. For comments or questions about our show, email us at learningenglish@voanews.com.

VOA World News is coming up at the beginning of the hour Universal Time.

Have a great day.