

## FEATURE STORY

### Ethiopian mothers struggle to feed their children amid Horn of Africa drought

By Malene Kamp Jensen



Photo credit: UNICEF/NYHQ2011-1251/Jiro Ose

**Odoleka, Ethiopia, 5 August 2011** – Montegbosh is still nursing her 18-month old son who clings to her chest even if she is busy sweeping the dusty ground by their hut in this small farming community an hour outside the capital of Addis Ababa. Like many young mothers in this drought inflicted country, she is opting to nurse longer. She has nothing else to feed her toddler.

Montegbosh says she resorts to exclusive breastfeeding to ensure that her son, Zerihun, will receive nutrients to grow, even if she herself relies on a diet of what is known as enset, or commonly referred to as 'false banana,' where the root is the full.

But Montegbosh says she is worried about what the future will hold. Her second child, who is four, is not getting enough to eat and there is no money to buy milk. Although the green land around her looks lush, failed rains have meant failed crops, which are making life difficult for 22-year-old Montegbosh, her children and hundreds of thousands of others in farm communities across the country who suffer in silence. A few days ago, just as things couldn't get much worse, the community pump broke down. Now Montegbosh and the rest of the families around her drink muddied water from a nearby creek.

Although far from the grim reality of starving Somalians who are fleeing areas of famine and conflict - with some 74,000 arriving to the southern part of this country this year alone - Ethiopia is dealing with the largest number of people who are going hungry in the Horn of Africa. Malnutrition among children has grown and some 4.56 million Ethiopians - around the same number as the population of Ireland - is in need of emergency food due to a combination of drought, soaring food prices, and a safety net that is being stretched to the limit. Of these, some 652,500 are children under the age of five.

The people of Odoleka fear that things will only get worse. The weather pattern has changed, they say, and there is no saying if the harvest will return to what it once was. The youngest are especially vulnerable. In June alone, 37 children

from the woreda or district of Soddo Dachi, of which Odoleka belongs, were treated for malnutrition. A nearby UNICEF supported health post has helped several children from the community, in part by giving ready-to-use therapeutic food provided by UNICEF in support of the Government's work of putting safety nets in place. The most dire and complicated cases are referred to a nearby hospital as a standard procedure.

"This is not normal," says Gurara Bekel, a community health worker, referring to the many cases of malnutrition in June, some of which he helped address at the health point. He especially fears that the children could be getting diarrhea if they are drinking dirty water.

"This is the worst drought I remember," said Kaba, who is in her 70s and has lived in this community all her life. "There is a problem," she says, pointing to the sky. "I don't know what the future will hold."

She is now pinning her hopes on two granddaughters who are staying with her after their parents have died. Both girls, 12-year-old Buze and 16-year-old Yenenesh, say they want to become doctors. They attend a nearby school but fear that if the rains do not return in a predictable pattern, the harvest will continue to fail and their dreams could be cut short.

"We have no money, so sometimes we have to work for food," says Yenenesh. "I worry about how to feed my grandmother but I will still try to continue to go to class and follow my goal."

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**High resolution photos available upon request**