

## FEATURE STORY

### SAVING CHILDREN IN ETHIOPIA AS CATTLE DIE OF DROUGHT

By Indrias Getachew

MOYALE DISTRICT, BORENA, 17 August 2011 – Berida Jateni appears worried and gaunt and much older than her 40-years. Sitting next to her hut in drought-ravaged Borena near the Kenya border she rues the impact of failed rains that is threatening to destroy the pastoralist way of life.

“I used to have 40 heads of cattle,” said Berida. “I only have five left, and they are also dying.”

Decaying carcasses of fallen cattle bare witness to the tragedy that has befallen Borena since the last decent rains fell over two years ago. Consecutive seasons of failed rains have decimated the prized cattle herds upon which the largely pastoralist Borena depend for their livelihoods. Able-bodied men in the worst-off areas near the border with Kenya have moved north in search of water and pasture with the surviving cattle.

The loss of their livestock has removed a critical source of income and nutrition for the Borena with particular impact on children. Berida’s youngest daughter, ten-month-old Firdoze Liben, was diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition two weeks ago, a condition that is deadly if untreated.

“Firdoze used to drink cows milk but now we don’t have any because all the cows died,” said Berida. Even if we wanted to buy milk there is none available.

“The drought has finished off our cattle and the few that remain are dying. We are afraid that it will be the people next unless we get help.”

Health Extension Workers Kalkidan Yimam and Chaltu Tesfaye walk through the parched landscape on their way to visit the severely malnourished children who are enrolled in the Outpatient Therapeutic Feeding Programme (OTP) that they run from the Meleb Village Health Post. Their first stop is at the home of Berida and Firdoze.

The impact of the drought on the health and nutritional status of the community is plain to see. It is a rail-thin Berida who emerges from her hut, carrying baby Firdoze. But thankfully some help has arrived.

“This is a largely pastoral community and they make their living and raise their children by selling milk and by feeding the children milk,” said Kalkidan Yimam. “But now, because the cattle have died, they don’t have anything to give their children and as a result the children are suffering.”

Kalkidan explains that they came across Firdoze when going from house-to-house to check on the children and screen for malnutrition. Using a specialized measuring tape around the arm of the little girl, they determined that she was severely malnourished and asked her mother to bring her to the health post. When she arrived, Firdoze weighed 5.7 kilograms.

“She was in really bad condition,” said Kalkidan, which is why they followed the protocol for admission and started giving the little girl ready to use therapeutic food (RUTF). “She is doing well and her weight is going up,” said Kalkidan, proudly noting that she now weighs 6.4 kilograms just two weeks after the start of the treatment.

Kalkidan and Chaltu have both been trained to treat severely malnourished children through the UNICEF-supported Outpatient Therapeutic Feeding Programme (OTP), which is part of the Government’s flagship Health Extension Programme to provide basic integrated health, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation services to its rural population.

Over 16,000 health posts staffed by two trained health extension workers like Kalkidan, are operating in the country. Since 2008 UNICEF has supported the training and provision of supplies for these health extension workers in OTP, enabling them to provide the life-saving service at the community level in close to 8,800 sites.

The Government of Ethiopia estimates that more than 150,000 under-five children will require treatment for severe acute malnutrition during the second half of 2011. This impressive surge in national capacity to respond to malnutrition is ensuring timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance in Ethiopia during this time of crisis, thereby mitigating the worst impact of the prolonged drought on children, who are the most vulnerable and the first to succumb to malnutrition.

Already, thousands of children’s lives have been saved.

But with the worst drought in recent memory, the system is stretched and UNICEF is urgently seeking additional resources to ensure that health extension workers like Kalkidan can continue their life-saving work.

“It has been three years since I started working at this health post,” said Kalkidan. “The situation now is very different from before. We had rain then and the cattle had not died. The cows gave milk and [parents] would give this to the children. But now that the cows have died, the children are suffering for lack of food. So now we are seeing more children affected, including mothers who are breastfeeding.

“It is not just the children who are suffering, it is also the mothers. The tradition here is for mothers to breastfeed for two years. While she is breastfeeding a mother is vulnerable if she does not have enough food to eat. She will suffer. So mothers who are breastfeeding and pregnant women are suffering now.”

Berida confirms this observation. At ten months she is still feeding Firdoze breast-milk, but says it is not enough. Without enough food for the family to eat at home, Berida herself has been losing weight.

“Today we have been visiting the homes of children who are severely malnourished. We have checked how [Firdoze] is eating. She is eating well - it means she has accepted the treatment. We have also checked if Berida is giving the RUTF as we prescribed. We have seen that she is handling it well.”

“I was afraid my child would die from malnutrition,” said Berida. “After the girls came to see my child, we have found relief, and my child has survived. I feel very happy.”

After concluding their visit to Berida and Firdoze, the health extension workers make their way to the neighbouring hut. Included inside the bag that Kalkidan carries are measuring tapes for determining the nutritional status of children. As they go from home-to-home the health extension workers use the opportunity to check the nutritional status of children five years or younger. If they find children who are moderately malnourished, they will advise the mother on how to improve the child’s diet using food available at home, and make a note to follow-up on the child’s condition. Where supplementary food rations, corn-soya blend and oil, are available, they will pass on the name of the child to concerned district officials for inclusion on the aid distribution list. If the child is severely malnourished, they make an appointment for the child to come to the health post for further screening and admission to the weekly outpatient therapeutic feeding programme. Children with medical complications - like diarrhea - are referred to a health center or hospital.

“My feelings about the present situation ... as you can see there is no rain,” says Kalkidan. “If it continues like this then it is very alarming... My message is that these people need help.”

UNICEF and partners are supporting the Government of Ethiopia to respond to the immediate needs of drought-affected communities including in Borena. This will need to include support to diversify livelihoods as well to help recover from the drought.