

PRESS RELEASE

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UNICEF calls for end to compassion fatigue over Ethiopia's dying children

ADDIS ABABA, 6 July 2005 – Amid all the excitement of the Live 8 concerts and G8 meetings, donors are showing increasingly worrying signs of compassion fatigue over the plight of Ethiopia's severely malnourished and dying children, UNICEF warned today.

Preventable diseases and malnutrition on average kill up to half a million Ethiopian children a year – more than the entire population of Edinburgh, capital of Scotland, the country playing host to this week's G8 Summit.

Following an additional surge in severe acute malnutrition cases, up to 170,000 Ethiopian children will die from this condition alone by the end of the year if not treated.

But major donors are not stepping up fast enough to provide vital funding for a package of life-saving treatments, screenings and other interventions, said Bjorn Ljungqvist, UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade people that this is a global scandal," said Mr Ljungqvist.

"A cloud of cynicism has settled over Africa – cynicism caused by everything from corruption to armed conflicts, cynicism felt by everyone from donors to the general public. But this cloud hides the fact that innocent children are dying unnecessarily. There are simple things that we can do and must do to save these children."

He spoke out as UNICEF was preparing to release an urgent update appeal to major donors, asking them to fill a US\$ 42 million gap in funding.

"On average, 500,000 Ethiopian children die every year from preventable diseases and malnourishment. This year could be worse," said Mr Ljungqvist. "In total, 7 million Ethiopian children suffer from some form of malnutrition every year, with serious consequences for their health and development.

"But there is a growing idea that these are 'normal' levels of child deaths and malnutrition for Ethiopia – that this is the 'usual' situation.

"There is nothing 'normal' about 500,000 children dying every year. That is more than the population of Edinburgh in Scotland or Las Vegas in the US. It would be an unimaginable tragedy if this happened in any country in the developed world."

Earlier this year UNICEF Ethiopia appealed for just short of US\$ 54.7 million to support Ethiopia's most vulnerable children during 2005 – US\$ 15 million for water and sanitation work, US\$ 39.7 million for health and nutrition.

But today – more than half way through the year – the 2005 Emergency campaign is still almost US\$ 42 million or 76.6 per cent short.

Health and nutrition services – designed to save the lives of the country's most vulnerable children with everything from anti-malaria mosquito nets to measles shots - have received just over a quarter of the necessary funds.

Water and sanitation work is in an even more parlous state with less than 18 per cent of its funding assured. Research has shown that clean water is as important as food supplies when it comes to child survival in drought emergencies.

“The world’s media has a role to play in this as well,” said Mr Ljungqvist. “News editors and reporters are always asking us ‘what’s new’ about this year’s figures. If the number of child deaths is not significantly larger year on year, the story does not get written.

“But 500,000 babies and children dying from preventable causes should be front page news every year,” he added. “And the fact that most of these deaths can be prevented through well proven and affordable measures is what makes the whole situation scandalous.”

UNICEF already has the mechanisms to reach and treat children in Ethiopia’s most vulnerable areas. Through the Enhanced Outreach Strategy – the largest ever partnership between UNICEF, the World Food Programme and the Ethiopian Government – a total of 6.8 million children in 325 drought affected districts are targeted every six months with vitamin A supplementation, de-worming, measles catch-up, nutritional screening, referral to supplementary feeding programmes and, increasingly, anti-malaria nets.

Research shows that something as simple as vitamin A supplementation every six months has the potential to reduce mortality by 23 per cent in the youngest children. Treatment of severe acute malnutrition, where it happens in Ethiopia, is reducing fatalities in severely malnourished children from 25-50% to below 5%.

But Ethiopia currently only has the capacity to treat 5,350 severely malnourished children at any one time (up from 2,000 in January). UNICEF estimates that the country needs a total of 19,400 places to treat severely malnourished children this year. The funding to support that increase is currently not there. Nor is it there to provide all the measles vaccinations, mosquito nets or emergency water supplies that Ethiopia’s children need.

“Gordon Brown, the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, is right to say that it will take a lifetime to help Africa’s people lift themselves out of the current situation,” said Mr Ljungqvist.

“But the first thing we have to do is to make sure children are allowed to survive and grow up. That is something we can do straight away. At the moment, a total of five million children across sub-Saharan Africa die from preventable diseases every year. That is equivalent to the entire population of Scotland.”

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