

FEEDING MALNOURISHED CHILDREN BACK TO HEALTH



Muluken and Asrat during the weekly feeding session.

Eighteen-month-old Muluken Zinabu's body was thin and listless, his belly distended, the skin covering his face stretched limp over his protruding forehead and cheekbones when he was brought in to see a doctor at the Wereda (district) 23 Health Center in Addis Ababa. His twenty-year-old mother Asrat Taye, thought that she would soon be burying him. Asrat does not have a job, and her husband's work as a daily laborer is irregular. She had been struggling to raise her son on their meager income, and with his latest bout of diarrhoea and vomiting, she had reached the point of desperation.

The attending doctor's diagnosis was malnutrition and Muluken was immediately referred to the health center's UNICEF-supported feeding programme. The Wereda 23 Health Center serves a population of 147,332, and among the services it provides is a two-month feeding programme for malnourished children between six-months and five-years of age. Asrat and Muluken were placed in a group of four mothers and one grandmother that meet on Tuesdays at the feeding center.

Guenet Zerihun is the health assistant at the health center responsible for the feeding programme. When patients are referred to the programme by a doctor, Guenet places them in nutrition groups that come to the center once a week to receive feeding and instruction. Guenet teaches them how and what they should feed their children at home.

"After my initial instruction we prepare the food together as that is the best way to make sure that they have understood the lessons. The children who come here have gotten to this point because of their parent's poor knowledge about nutrition or because of poverty, or a combination of both. At this center we provide them with a variety of nutritious foods, for example, fortified flour, carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables, bananas, oranges, and other fruits that are in season, eggs and milk. They use these ingredients to prepare meals for their children when they come to the center for their weekly sessions. They can also purchase the items from the center at discount prices.

"When the children come here they are very much underweight. They stay with me for two months. We weigh them every month to monitor their progress. After two months, if they are still underweight, I refer them back to the doctor who may extend their feeding programme. I am very pleased and grateful that this is a rare occurrence at this center"

When his two months with the feeding programme are over, Muluken will be checked again to see if he has gained enough weight to be released. If his progress is not satisfactory, the doctor may order that he continue for another two months. If he has not shown any progress at all, Muluken will be referred to one of the bigger hospitals in town.

Asrat says that she is pleased because she can see that Muluken is growing stronger as a result of the new skills that she has picked up and the food assistance that he has received through the UNICEF-supported feeding programme. The programme offers parents discounted foodstuffs, and this has made a big difference in her ability to feed Muluken properly.

Nitsuh Alemayehu, 21, is another member of the Tuesday feeding group. She has come to the center with her three-year-old son Habtamu Mulat.

Nitsuh used to work as a live-in domestic servant until she became pregnant with Habtamu. "I had to leave that job when I got pregnant and so I moved in with my sister who had rented a one-room home from the kebele (sub-district) where she was raising her own daughter alone. Last year my sister died, so now I have two children to take care of, my sister's eight-year-old and my own son.

"I am finding it very difficult to make ends meet, especially since I do not have a regular job. My niece is in school and I am struggling to make sure that she can continue. I am not sure what I will do when Habtamu reaches school age. I am supporting these two children with the small amount I make washing clothes in different people's homes.



Nitsuh, Habtamu, and Guenet
after the weekly feeding session.

"I brought Habtamu in to see the doctor three weeks ago and we were referred to this feeding programme. Now I am seeing change in his situation, at least he is eating again. I am buying the things that I can afford so that he will have a balanced diet following the instruction that I have received from Guenet, who takes care of us in this programme."

Malnutrition affects a large proportion of Ethiopian children and is an underlying cause in more than 50 percent of deaths of children under five-years-old. More than half of children under the age of five are

stunted due to chronic malnutrition. While these conditions are prevalent in rural areas, malnutrition among urban children as a result of poverty and household food insecurity is also not uncommon.

The overall objectives of UNICEF's nutrition programme in Ethiopia are to reduce malnutrition, vitamin A deficiency and under five mortality; to reduce iodine deficiency disorders and to reduce morbidity and mortality during nutrition emergencies. UNICEF works with the Ministry of Health, Regional Health Bureaus, the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission, and other partners toward this end.