

MOZAMBIQUE

Improving the nutritional status of children living with HIV

Twenty-seven-year-old Maria is so absorbed in her attempts to soothe her crying baby that she is oblivious of the flies that settle on her emaciated rash-covered arms.

Eventually the rocking movement calms baby Carlos enough for his mother to put a syringe into his mouth. He sucks on the liquid hungrily – a cocktail of antiretroviral drugs. Like his mother, Carlos is HIV-positive and suffers from malnutrition.

“We are both so sick. Sometimes he is in hospital or it is me, or sometimes we go down together,” says the young mother. “He has already been admitted into hospital three times since he was born.”

Nutritional problems are the underlying cause of almost 50 per cent of all child deaths in Mozambique, especially in areas affected by HIV and AIDS, natural disasters and other chronic emergencies.

The mother and her baby are sitting on a mat outside their tiny home, which they share with Maria’s mother and her 15-year-old brother, set off a dirt road in the Peranha Manga suburb of the city of Beira.

Asked how she is surviving, she says that her elderly, frail mother and her brother, who had to drop out of school at grade eight due to lack of funds, farm their plot of cassava and sweet potatoes. “I am too weak to go,” says Maria.

Today, she is visited by an activist of Khulupira, an association of people living with HIV/AIDS, and a representative from Health Alliance International, a UNICEF-supported non-governmental organization, which helps communities to play an active role assisting those trying to survive HIV and AIDS.

“Food does not stretch to all who need it,” explains the member of Khulupira. “There are so many others around who are in the same situation.”

A visit to the female medical ward of Beira Central Hospital, and one can easily believe his claim. Young women occupy all the beds, others lie on mattresses on the floor with their drips, and others in the corridor leading to the ward. Beira is the city with the highest HIV prevalence rate in the country, officially at 26.5 per cent.

To address acute malnutrition found in children living in areas of drought, food insecurity and high HIV prevalence rates, UNICEF supports the Ministry of Health to scale up therapeutic and supplementary feeding interventions, which help save the lives of chronically vulnerable children and women.

In addition to receiving drugs, malnourished children living with HIV are treated with ready-to-use therapeutic food, also called Plumpy'Nut. The goal is to expand this intervention to all paediatric hospitals in the country over the next three years.

Maria is still hopeful of survival. Although Carlos should be double his 5 kg, he has gained weight. She smiles down at Carlos and rocks him to sleep.