

NEWS NOTE

Far Too Many Children Still at Risk of Malnutrition in Niger

NIAMEY, 31 July 2007 – On the onset of the lean season, when communities are most vulnerable, still too many children are at risk of malnutrition. The response put in place has proven to be efficient for thousands of children, but needs to be scaled up to benefit every child in need.

The latest national nutrition survey reveals that the proportion of children suffering from acute malnutrition is contained at 11.2% at the national level, from 15.3% in October 2005. More importantly, as compared to October 2005, the severe form of acute malnutrition has been cut in half.

This illustrates the impact of the large scale intervention put in place in response to the 2005 nutritional crisis. "It means that thousands of child lives were saved but it also means that far too many child lives are on the brink" says Noel Zagre, Nutrition Chief at UNICEF Niger.

The national average however conceals alarming disparities and trends at the regional level and for different age groups.

- Children under three years old are the most affected: 15.5% of these are acutely malnourished. The situation is especially worrying in the region of Agadez, Diffa, Maradi and Zinder where severe acute malnutrition in children under three has sharply increased in the last months.
- In two of the eight regions, levels of acute malnutrition are above the emergency threshold (>15%), revealing a recent and significant deterioration of the nutritional status of children under five. The global acute malnutrition rate is at a troubling 19.6% in Diffa and at 17.5% in Agadez. In the regions of Maradi and Zinder, considered as prime farming areas, the situation is critical. Acute malnutrition rates increased sharply in the last six months, now respectively at 11.8% and 14.2%.
- High rates of malnutrition in young children are rooted in the lack of access to age-appropriate food and feeding practices and the lack of access to basic health services. The situation is compounded by the lack of access of women and caregivers to life-saving information, education and support within a context of massive and pervasive poverty.

This updated picture of the nutrition situation of children enables UNICEF and its partners to fine-tune the intervention already under way to attend to an estimated 275,000 malnourished children during the months of the lean season (July to October).

In response to the findings of the survey, UNICEF is stepping up its support to the Government in coordinating a network of 21 NGOs to:

- Scale up therapeutic care to reach children in need not yet covered by the more than 900 facility and community-based feeding centers already operational. UNICEF provides

staff training, therapeutic foods, essential medicine, anthropometric equipment and monitoring and counseling to nutritional centers.

- Provide, in cooperation with the World Food Programme, all children under three in all the regions, except Niamey, with free distribution of supplementary food covering their needs for two months. In the region of Diffa, the operation will be extended to all children under five and to pregnant and lactating women and will include deworming and vitamin A supplementation.
- Intensify community-based activities to prevent children from slipping into malnutrition and identify and refer malnourished children to care and feeding centers.
- Intensify policy and programme action to prevent malnutrition. A particular focus is placed on the protection, promotion and support of improved infant feeding practices, such as exclusive breastfeeding and age-appropriate complementary foods and feeding practices together with vitamin and mineral supplementation, deworming and malaria control.
- Provide women and caregivers with life-saving education and counseling.

Among the recommendations coming out of the survey are the following:

- Ensure that all children have access to age-appropriate foods, feeding and hygiene practices for optimal nutrition and growth
- Ensure that all children have free access to essential health services for optimal survival, growth and development
- Ensure that the most vulnerable households and communities have access to support measures to reduce food insecurity and alleviate vulnerability.

“A lot has been done to improve the nutrition situation of children” says Akhil Iyer, UNICEF Representative in Niger. “We must be ready and must scale up the response to save thousands child lives at risk during the lean season. However, improvement of the situation will come only from a sustained support to improve access to health care, access to life-saving information and practices, especially for women, access to education, especially for girls, and rural and community development.”

Since the beginning of the year, UNICEF and its partners treated 152,934 children and they expect to treat a total of 370,000 malnourished children over the course of the year.

###

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in 155 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

For further information, please contact:

Gaëlle Bausson, UNICEF Niger, +227 20 72 69 97 or +227 96 29 67 51, gbausson@unicef.org