

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

MAURITANIA

ENSURING HEALTHY CHILDREN THROUGH DEWORMING AND VITAMIN A SUPPLEMENTATION

Before the first light of dawn, 30-year-old Habi Anne, a mother of three, rushes to the health centre of Kaédi, the capital of one of the country's poorest regions. Today she brings her four-year-old son, whose health has always been fragile. Like many peers, he has several pathologies and his survival remains at risk. He is in danger of being part of the one-eighth of Mauritanian children who are likely to die before their fifth birthday.

One-third of the children who receive treatment at the Kaédi health centre are malnourished, a percentage which increases during the hungry season, when granaries and stomachs are empty. The health indicators registered in Kaédi are the worst in the country: one-third of school-aged children suffer from vitamin A deficiency and 8 out of every 10 children in the same age group are anaemic. To take up this challenge, Mauritania has successfully implemented a biannual deworming campaign coupled with vitamin A supplementation, which will protect the sight and the lives of some 500,000 children aged 6–59 months throughout the country this year.

Alarmed by her child's persistent diarrhoea, Habi Anne wanted to avoid the worst. "When he has the slightest health problem, I take him to the health centre," she says. Chief Medical Officer Dr Mohammed Saïd, who examines the child, believes that most of the small diseases due to malnutrition have to be managed correctly. "Children are usually infested with parasites, which lead to undernutrition and anaemia. These organisms, especially roundworms (intestinal worms that may reach several centimetres), are one of the leading causes of these pathologies," he adds.

To address the problem, free deworming drugs are being administered to all children under age five. The centre's health professionals launched a large UNICEF-supported campaign at Kaédi and the surrounding areas, together with associations, NGOs, health posts and schools. Equipped with megaphones and supported by the media and the mosques, tens of volunteers go door-to-door and tent-to-tent to overcome communities' fear of deworming drugs.

"The people know us", says Ms. Cira, a nurse. "They trust us. We remind them that their children eat earth, accidentally or not, because they lack iron. This causes diarrhoea. Then, they become stunted. They vomit. They have fever. If they stop eating, we need to rapidly deworm them."

Deworming is provided together with vitamin A supplementation. "To ensure acceptance of vitamin A supplementation, we need to link it with deworming, which is more easily understood," says Dr Mohamed Saïd. The message was well received at Kaédi and surrounding areas, as 90 per cent of the targeted population participated in the campaign. This high coverage was due to the joint efforts of UNICEF and the central service for nutrition, who work flat-out and very close together in the strategic and operational plan to control malnutrition and, along the way, to save children. Provided resources are available, integrated nutritional interventions will be implemented to improve Mauritanian children's survival.

Habi Anne, following the example of other mothers, actively prepares her little son, who is feeling better, blossoming and growing up, for his return to school.