

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

ZIMBABWE

HUNGER, LACK AND LOSS STALK SIX-YEAR-OLD MELISSA JAMBO

A year ago Melissa Jambo lost her father. Her mother is critically ill and has moved to their rural home leaving her in the care of a teenage sister and a distant relative. Together they can barely afford a decent meal – let alone three meals – happy to eat maize paste with salt as relish when they can get it.

Two months ago, Melissa was sick. She was so emaciated she could not walk to school. She weighed 10 kilos, the average weight of a nine-month-old baby, nearly half of what she should weigh. “I wanted to go to school, to play with my friends, but I could not. I was so weak. I was always hungry, in the morning, in the afternoon, and even when I went to sleep I was hungry.”

She is not alone. Melissa’s story is now recurring with shocking yet growing frequency across Zimbabwe, where children are orphaned and made more vulnerable by AIDS, the economy, deteriorating social services and growing food insecurity. Here, one in five adults is HIV-positive, one in four children is orphaned, inflation is at 11 million per cent, shop shelves are empty, more than 5 million people require food aid, malnutrition is climbing, life expectancy is crashing and the social welfare system is almost non-existent.

A paediatric unit at Harare Hospital admits 15 babies on cases of severe malnutrition on any particular day. With disastrous harvests, shortage of basic food commodities, soaring food prices when the food is available, out-of-control inflation, and shrinking food aid, cases of malnutrition in children aged between 6 months and 12 years are pronounced now more than ever.

“Zimbabwean children cannot afford a looming malnutrition threat in addition to the immense challenges they already face every day,” said UNICEF Representative in Zimbabwe Roeland Monasch. “Yet it is a very serious and real concern as families grapple to feed their children.”

Children are the most vulnerable to nutritional deficits and the first to succumb when there is not enough food at home. Those with severe malnutrition have a 25 to 50 per cent chance of dying if they are not treated properly.

To arrest and reverse malnutrition from the emergency threshold, UNICEF supports 60 therapeutic feeding centres for children diagnosed with severe malnutrition. At these centres, children are weighed and measured for height and arm circumference. Some receive a mixture of milk, vitamins and calcium called F75, while others go home with a two-week supply of Plumpy’nut, a ready-to-use nutritional paste. Apart from feeding the patients, these centres also offer parents and caregivers daily lessons on nutrition, childcare and hygiene education.

It is through such a centre in Dzivarasekwa, one of Zimbabwe’s poorest high-density suburbs, that Melissa was identified when she was on the brink. Since then she has gained 3 kilos, she can walk on her own and is back in school. “I am now strong and I can go to school, I am now fit.” She is. The challenge for UNICEF is to reach thousands of children across Zimbabwe who are just like her.

As Zimbabwe enters the height of the lean season, the danger of a malnutrition crisis does not seem far away, yet it seems too daunting for the country’s children already in the throes of a humanitarian crisis. Like Melissa most children who are vulnerable are already orphaned because of AIDS, some are malnourished because they have AIDS, most lack access to quality health care, education and clean water. Combined, the country’s most desperate citizens – its children – are suffering like never before.

“Zimbabwe’s children deserve better. They deserve to go to school, to drink clean water, to access quality health care and to go to bed without feeling hungry,” Mr. Monasch added. “Without humanitarian assistance, the fate of these children will remain largely unchanged.”