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Photo: Tesfalem Waldeys/IRIN

A mother and a child at a therapeutic feeding centre: Parts of the country are facing extreme food insecurity after the long rains failed

ETHIOPIA: "We do not have anything in the house"

HARAR, 10 June 2008 (IRIN) - Expecting that the rains would fall soon so she could plant some vegetables, Nuria Mohammed sold her five cattle cheaply to raise some money to buy food for her family.

"I sold the cattle for 200 Br (Birr) to 300 Br," she said. "They had become skinny because of lack of adequate pasture, but still they were our only family assets. Previously, they would each have been worth 1,000 Br (US\$105)."

Seven months later, the rains had still not come to Nuria's village of Burak

Jeneta, East Hararghe zone in southern Ethiopia's Oromiya Region.

"Now, we do not have anything in our house," Nuria said of the impact of a drought that has hit the region, drying up food resources and water wells and wiping out pastures.

According to the government Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency (DPPA), Oromiya and Somali regions are facing extreme food insecurity after the long rains failed in some pastoral areas during the last planting season, followed by poor to very poor short rains.

Many of the affected people, like Nuria, can no longer afford to buy wheat and corn from the local market. "I bought a quintal (around 100 kg) of corn for 500 Birr," she told IRIN at a health centre where she was nursing a sick child. "A year ago, I would have bought the same amount of corn with 200 to 250 Br."

Unable to cope with the situation, Nuria and her neighbours had decided to abandon their village. They however changed their minds when the government began distributing food aid within their area.

Then the children started falling ill, forcing Nuria to seek help at the Water Health Centre. "When I was nursing Faiza, I was sick, so I could not breastfeed her properly," the 25-year-old mother of four said.

Lying beside her daughter, Faiza Abdulmalieh, were other severely malnourished and underweight children. Nearby was Nuria's other daughter, Fatima, who was recovering from a bout of diarrhoea. She was being treated for oedema on both legs.

The two children, both less than five, are among at least 29,735 of similar age who health workers at the centre estimate are malnourished in East Hararghe zone.

Some efforts

This is not the first time the zone has experienced severe drought. In 2003, another lasted a year. Nuria, like some other parents, remembers the period because that was when she lost two children.

"Before they died, their stomachs were swollen," she said.

Along with the drought, rising food prices and limited market supplies have hit poor Ethiopian families hard. According to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) market monitoring estimates, the price of maize increased by 83 percent while sorghum went up by 89 percent and wheat by 54 percent in the period between September 2007 and February 2008.

This situation, according to the deputy head of the East Hararghe Health Office, Aliye Youya, has contributed to the prevalence of malnutrition in the area.

Various efforts to contain the problem are being spearheaded. In 2004, following the drought and its devastating effects on children's health, a programme targeting at least 5.8 million children and 1.6 million pregnant and lactating women was launched.

Called 'The Enhanced Outreach Strategy (EOS)', it was a collaborative attempt to contain the situation by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the WFP, the health ministry and the DPPA.

Among other activities, it provides bi-annual malnutrition screening services for children. Once screened, those found to be moderately malnourished are referred to the WFP for its targeted supplementary food assistance.

The EOS campaign also provides children with Vitamin A and iodine supplements, de-wormers and mosquito nets. But only six out of 18 woredas (districts) in East Hararghe are currently benefiting from the EOS programme due to resource shortfalls.

“Drought has caused crop failure in some of the most vulnerable areas of the country where 10 million people are food insecure”

More needs to be done say leaders in the area. "The NGOs are coming here and collecting data but we are not receiving any assistance from them," Ahenafi Kassahun, the acting head of the Water Health Centre, said.

"I have been receiving therapeutic food from the health office in East Hararghe, but it is not enough," he added.

According to the DPPA, about US\$68 million will be required to implement a humanitarian response plan for Ethiopia this year - of which about US\$33 million is planned for the provision of food.

In an April report, the agency said a joint assessment had estimated that 1.36 million people required emergency food assistance in Somali Region and areas of Oromiya, the Somali National Regional State and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, Amhara and Gambella regions.

Aid organisations put the number of people in need of emergency food assistance at 3.4 million. On 3 June, government officials revised it upwards to 4.5 million, including 75,000 children under five.



Photo: Tesfalem Waldeys/IRIN

Queuing up for food: The Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency says Oromiya and Somali regions are facing extreme food insecurity

The total number of affected people, NGOs said, is much higher. "Drought has caused crop failure in some of the most vulnerable agricultural and pastoral areas of the country, where 10 million people are food insecure," CHF International said on 9 June.

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