

## UNICEF feels the pinch of the food price crisis

As Ethiopia struggled with high food prices and a lack of relief aid in 2008, the UN children's agency, UNICEF, initiated one of the biggest responses to fight severe malnutrition ever undertaken.

JOHANNESBURG, 28 January 2009 (IRIN) - It spent more than US\$50 million to dramatically increase the number of sites providing ready-to-eat blended food used to treat acutely malnourished children, and plan to spend a similar amount this year.

UNICEF estimates that it will need 600 to 1,000 tonnes of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) a month in Ethiopia, but availability will "remain a major issue" in 2009.

"The global demand for ready-to-use therapeutic food outstripped supply last year, which gives the sense of the scale of the need," explained Louis-Georges Arsenault, director of UNICEF's emergency programme. The agency has had to intensify its nutritional interventions in 17 of the 27 countries identified as worst affected by the global food price crisis.

This year UNICEF is asking for just over US\$1 billion in its new global appeal, of which health and nutrition needs will take the biggest portion - 38 percent - to care for women and children in only 36 countries, "and UNICEF runs operations in 150 countries," Arsenault noted.

Even before the price spike in 2008, "many families were struggling to survive, although prices fell by 75 percent between 1974 and 2005", said the UNICEF appeal document. "Between May 2007 and May 2008 the food price index rose by 50 percent, making it impossible for some families to afford basic foods for their children."

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Since 2008, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Somalia have doubled UNICEF's financial needs for protracted emergencies in Eastern and Southern Africa in 2009. Zimbabwe, with its collapsing social services and a cholera epidemic that has claimed almost 3,000 lives, has escalated UNICEF's requirements in that country fivefold.

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