

# East Africa Children's Crisis

July 2006

## Background

For the last three years, the rains have failed across East Africa, creating a severe drought. The drought has affected more than 16 million people across Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea.

Almost 8 million people are in need of immediate emergency assistance. Of these, almost 4 million are children under 18 years old and 1.6 million are children under the age of five. Nearly 300,000 children are acutely malnourished – 40,000 are so severely malnourished that without urgent therapeutic feeding they could face death within a matter of months.

Rains have begun in the affected areas, but they have come too late to bring any substantial relief. In many areas, heavy rainfall has now exacerbated the impact of the drought. Cattle already weakened by lack of food and exhaustion quickly succumb to hypothermia and die. Carcasses of dead animals piled up around water sources can also act as breeding grounds for disease. Incidents of water-borne diseases will increase, as people drink from and wash with water from these sources.



At an Alternative Basic Education (ABE) school, Mohammed Humed Ahmed, 12, attends flexible classes which allow him to carry out family duties and also continue his education.  
Credit: UNICEF/ HQ06-0508/Indrias Getachew

## Pastoralist communities

About 40 per cent of East Africa's estimated 19.5 million pastoralists live on less than a dollar a day. Pastoral livelihoods are dependent on the vagaries of nature which makes them particularly vulnerable.

When a drought occurs, animals begin to die, and these already marginalised people lose everything they own. The next to die are children under five years of age – fed on a diet of meat and milk, these children become ill with

commonplace infections much more quickly than children raised in urban areas, who are accustomed to more varied diets.

Children play an important role in the nomadic lifestyle. Boys as young as eight herd the family's cattle whilst girls help with the household chores. Most pastoral children grow up with little or no access to health-care and education.

## UNICEF's response

UNICEF has launched an appeal

# Information Sheet

for \$80 million (approximately £45.7 million). Working with other agencies, we are adapting emergency programmes in the areas of water and sanitation, health, nutrition, education and protection to reach and support pastoral children and their way of life.

### Health and nutrition

UNICEF are scaling up targeted feeding programmes and supporting mobile clinics and health posts throughout the region. These mobile health teams will reach pastoralists who miss out on the limited treatment offered by conventional health centres. These teams have the ability to reach people with a package of life-saving interventions such as nutritional screening, therapeutic feeding and malaria treatment.

A grave threat to the health of children in East Africa is the low immunisation coverage in all of the affected countries. To counter this, a major measles vaccination campaign is planned in Eritrea and a recent measles, vitamin A and polio campaign in Kenya has achieved 90 per cent coverage. Children who are weakened by malnutrition are highly vulnerable to malaria, so distribution of malaria nets treated with long-lasting insect repellent is ongoing.

In some areas tetanus is also cause for concern. It can affect children who cut themselves during play and mothers and infants can become infected during childbirth if unclean instruments are used to cut and treat the umbilical cord. Worldwide in 2004, at least 150,000 babies and 30,000

mothers died from the disease. In Kenya alone we aim to reach over 600,000 children with five doses of the vaccine which will provide them with lifetime protection against infection.

### Education

Schools are reporting increased drop-out rates and some have been forced to shut as families move in search of water.

Whenever possible, keeping children in school during a crisis is advantageous for the entire community. Not only does it enable children to continue learning, but schools are also safe and easy places for the provision of water and food.

To ensure that schools remain open and attendance levels are maintained UNICEF are providing water to schools, offering bursaries to help ensure that children (especially girls) remain in school, and providing school tents and education materials such as school-in-a-box kits.

Other education interventions have been devised to meet the constraints of the pastoral way of life. The Alternative Basic Education (ABE) strategy, for example, provides flexible teaching hours which allows children to fulfil their household responsibilities and also attend school. In Ethiopia, 150 of these ABE centres are being built to reach at least 7,500 children. In Kenya, small scale education projects are in place in which specially trained teachers travel from pasture to pasture with groups of pastoralists using portable classrooms so children can continue attending classes.

### Water and sanitation

A high proportion of childhood

illnesses in the affected areas, including diarrhoea, are linked to the consumption of unsafe water. An added concern is that mothers in countries such as Djibouti do not exclusively breastfeed but rather give their children water during the first few months of life.



To improve access to clean water UNICEF are tankering water to communities, drilling and restoring boreholes and handpumps, supplying water bladders and purification chemicals for treatment plants. The supply of water to health centres and schools is our top priority.


### Timely response

The area affected by the drought is already one of the most vulnerable regions in the world. The threat from the drought is compounded by low immunisation rates, poor health services, malaria and, in some areas, violent conflict.

Children must be reached as quickly as possible with life-saving interventions. UNICEF's emergency appeal is still underfunded – we urgently need your help to continue reaching children in East Africa affected by this crisis.

**You can help by making a donation to our East Africa Children's Crisis Appeal.**

 08457 312 312  
 [www.unicef.org.uk/donate](http://www.unicef.org.uk/donate)

 Send a cheque, made payable to UNICEF, to:  
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