

Niger: Another Malnourished Child Every Minute. What Can Be Done?

Over 57,000 severely malnourished children will be treated this year in Niger by the teams of NGOs Alima and Befen and Niger's Ministry of Public Health, or 15,000 more than last year. In certain weeks of 2013, a new case of severe acute malnutrition was declared every minute in Niger¹. Yet 2013 has not even been considered a crisis year, which is a reminder of the deeply chronic nature of these exceptional acute malnutrition rates. Alima and Befen are calling for the implementation of new approaches for reducing the number of cases and subsequent mortality.

Niamey/Dakar, September 25th, 2013: once again this year NGOs Alima and Befen are seeing a considerable increase in the number of severely acute malnourished (SAM) children with an additional 15,000 cases predicted in their programs² compared to the previous year. Nationwide the 2013 rate is already 10% higher than 2012³, a year that was considered a major nutritional crisis.

Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain the increase in the malnutrition cases in 2013, in particular the increase in the price of staple goods, the crises affecting neighboring countries, improved coverage of humanitarian programs and a particularly high incidence of malaria. Over 300,000 children in Niger have to receive treatment for severe acute malnutrition. This figure has increased constantly since 2005. Despite increased action taken by national and local authorities and humanitarian players every year, the acute malnutrition rate is above the 15% emergency threshold set by the World Health Organization.

"We have to change our way of responding to these food crises," says Thierry Allafort-Duverger, Alima's president. "We can and must implement new pediatric strategies on a large scale by mobilizing all the medical and nutritional tools we have at our disposal and by rethinking our way of supplying these services. To do so all players have to agree on a reading based on accessibility to good quantity and quality of food and on the correlation between malnutrition and young children's health generally."

Solutions exist for permanently reducing the number of children suffering from malnutrition.

Alima and Befen call for the mobilization of all players for supporting efforts that will enable the number of malnourished children to be reduced. With what we know today such efforts must combine early treatment of malnutrition and the main pathologies that kill children as well as their prevention. We've got the tools: immunization, adapted food supplements, treated mosquito nets and the recent seasonal mass chemical prophylaxis to fight malaria. These kinds of interventions are

¹ "Scaling Up Niger S35: Treating Malnutrition: the Follow-up of Weekly Admissions" UNICEF. 11,457 cases of severe acute malnutrition treated in week 21, or 1.13 new cases every minute.

² Like for like increase.

³ In week 34 of 2013, 242,722 SAM children were treated compared to 221,069 in 2012. Source: op. cit.

the only ones to have shown their worth in significantly reducing the number of malnourished children and drastically lowering the mortality in infants and children.

Preliminary findings of projects including prevention by the distribution of supplementary ready-to-use foods and full pediatric care carried out in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso show significant impact in reducing chronic malnutrition and mortality. These findings were presented at the International Conference for Malnutrition held last May in Paris⁴.

"We should no longer be talking about crop failures or food crises in such and such a year in Niger," says Dr. Sani Sayadi, General Co-ordinator of the Niger medical NGO Befen, "but the structural crisis in public health that has to do with access to care and appropriate food for young children. Thanks to the action taken by the Niger authorities and humanitarian players, Niger is a leading country in the fight against the world's malnutrition and an example in the struggle to lower childhood mortality. But without the adoption of drastic measures, the number of children suffering from malnutrition will continue to increase structurally. This situation is not bearable. Today it is possible to set the goal of reversing this curve."

BEFEN (Bien Etre de la Femme et de l'Enfant au Niger) is a Niger based NGO created in 2002. It is a charity uniting doctors and health professionals to promote well-being in women and children in Niger. By 2013 it has become one of Niger's biggest NGOs in treating severe acute malnutrition.

ALIMA (The Alliance for International Medical Action/Alliance pour l'Action Médicale Internationale) is an international NGO created in 2009, offering an innovative project of humanitarian action by networking with national and international players for improving operational practices.

ALIMA BEFEN are conducting two medical/food projects in Niger together with the Ministry of Public Health in Dakoro, the Maradi and Mirriah regions and the Zinder region. These projects are being funded by ECHO, the European Commission's Office of Humanitarian Affairs.

For further information, go to www.alimaong.org

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⁴ For further information go to www.conference-malnutrition-infantile.org