

Futures valued: What chance for poor children: Can we feed the starving?: Niger is the poorest country in the world and its terrible famine has made headlines. But while many starve, there is food if you can pay for it. So does the case of Niger show that, when the free market rules, the poorest only suffer?

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Angela Robson

They called her the bag of rice woman. With her family's stocks of millet long gone, she had strapped her shrunken baby to her back, and set off in search of food. When she reached the emergency feeding centre two days later, her son was close to death.

The medical staff gave her no choice. They said they wouldn't allow her any rice unless she let them treat her sick child first. And she would have to stay with him until he got better.

Fati Karim refused. "I came for food," she insisted. "I know he's going to die. But I need to go home to my village today."

When we meet, two months later, she is standing in a pool of sunlight behind the Tillabery feeding centre, bags of millet and boxes of sugar stacked up to one side. Outside is a scene of turmoil as hundreds of women in brightly coloured robes and headaddresses flock to the front gate to collect their weekly rations of rice, oil and fortified porridge. The mothers at the front of the queue are those whose babies have been identified as malnourished. Behind them, three soldiers, foreheads bathed in perspiration, struggle to maintain order in the sweltering mid-morning heat.

Lying amid the folds of his mother's yellow dress is a sleeping child. Abdul Karim's belly is still visibly distended from the lack of food in his short life, but his skin is now glowing and his breathing easy.

"There was nothing left of this boy," says Fati. "He looked very strange, he was just a big head and my village was already calling him a ghost. The nurse tried to put a drip in his arm, but she struggled for almost half an hour; he had no flesh on him. But after a week in the hospital, he started to get better. When I went back to my village, they couldn't believe he was the same child."

Was it more important for you to take rice home to your village than save your baby? I ask. "I needed to get back to work in the fields, to my other children," she replies simply. "Abdul was already dead to me. But when I did return home, the people in my village were overjoyed and proud of me for staying."

Not far from this woman and her son is a very different scene. In a makeshift ward 20 metres away, a tiny girl, aged 13 months, has just been weighed. Her gaunt features are sharpened and adult-like and huge, tired eyes stare into the distance. Her facial appearance, says Dr Sali Dowda, the clinical director of the centre, is a symptom of marasmus, the severe emaciation that characterises acute malnutrition. Faiza is five kilos (11lbs). "At her age," states Dr Dowda, "she should weigh 9.5 kilos."

It seems eerily quiet in this part of the building although we can hear other children wailing and coughing in the background. Faiza winces in pain and cries out feebly when her skeletal body touches the hard plastic surface of the measuring machine.

Faiza's mother, Mariama, tells me that her problems began when locusts ate her crop, and got worse when the prices of food in the market escalated. "I cannot afford to buy millet, so I had no food, and I had no milk to feed my baby." She left her village at five o'clock this morning and walked 20 km to reach the centre. Faiza is her fifth born. Her other children are all dead. "Whenever your child is sick, you feel sick," she says.

When Plan Niger started the feeding operation in partnership with Islamic Relief and Unicef in Tillabery, western Niger, news of the famine was just beginning to filter out to the outside world. Even without a food crisis on its hands, Niger is the poorest country in the world and struggles to feed its people. This year, a combination of drought, locust infestation and profiteering has made food dangerously scarce. Relief has been slow to arrive.

"There is plenty of food, but children are still dying because their parents cannot afford to buy it," Dr Dowda asserts. "I see babies who are even worse than this one, but once we are able to start treating them, they can recover. Before food distribution began, 43% of children in the Tillabery area were severely malnourished. Fifty-one per cent of these children have since been rehabilitated."

Even when there isn't a famine, one in four children in Niger will die before they reach five. One of the main challenges still facing staff at the Tillabery clinic, however, is preventing women removing their children before they've been properly treated. Dr Dowda says that some mothers leave the centre barely two or three days after treatment has begun because they cannot spend three whole weeks in hospital while expected to tend to their other children, domestic chores and crops.

"Constant pregnancies and low take-up rates of breastfeeding also compound the problem of malnutrition," says Fadimata Alainchar, programme director of Plan Niger. "Similarly, there are taboos about giving a new-born baby colostrum because it is believed to be poisonous."

She says that Fati Karim's initial refusal to allow treatment for her sick baby is not uncommon among rural women who have large families.

"This is the fatalistic aspect you have here in our societies. A woman is so used to seeing her children dying, there is even a psychological preparation for the mother. We have a saying, 'a woman is like a jug, and the child is like water. If the jug is not broken, you can put water in it. But once the jug is broken, there's nowhere to put water.' This means, as far as a woman can give birth, she will be pregnant and she will give birth. So the child will be replaced. So for us it's not the child which is important. It's this attitude we have to change."

In the village of Desa, a settlement of elaborately sculpted mud houses surrounded by sand, 250km east of Niamey, a group of 20 women sit under the shade of a large thorn tree. While malnutrition hovers around 40% in the area, in Desa, it has been reduced to 17%. The women, preparing fortified unimix porridge beneath the tree are the local "dinner ladies", trained by Plan Niger and local NGOs to cook lunch for children in the nearby primary school. In exchange for food aid, the dinner ladies also work voluntarily in the village providing advice on child-feeding, education and safe drinking water.

Only 10% of women in this village can read and write, and education about breastfeeding, child bearing, and nutrition prior to this project was virtually non-existent, says Zeinabou Hisaka, one of the coordinators. She is resplendent in orange and blue robes but has a gaunt, haunted face. She says she and her family ate weeds to survive when the famine was at its worst.

"I, like most women here, had no idea how to feed a child properly. Since we started cooking in the school, we've become aware of the nutritious elements that are needed in the feeding of a child. All my five children were malnourished."

Zeinabou's youngest child, the toddler she cradles on her knee, was the weakest. "Before I could not even work because the boy was so sick, he was always crying."

Bremer Kadrini is the headmaster of Desa primary school. He says that, during the worst months of the famine, children were too weak to come to school.

"Children's education is always neglected each year during the hungry season, but this year it was worse. Once the mothers started cooking in school, our pupils were guaranteed one good meal a day and started attending lessons again."

The community feeding scheme started in three villages, its success has encouraged it to spread to 18 other villages. Hadjira Hamidou, Plan Niger's development officer in Tillabery, says the project has given the women enhanced status in a strongly patriarchal culture.

"The dinner ladies have quite literally held this community together and kept our children alive. And by keeping children in their communities, we also prevent them from being sent away to work away from home, a situation which makes them vulnerable to trafficking."

Although some farmers have already harvested their crops, market prices remain very high compared with the five-year average. "For the past year the peasants in this village have been living off credit," states Bremer Kadrini. "Although they've had a better harvest of millet this year, all the money they will make will have to be paid off for their loans. What we get from this year can help us survive for five to six months but not the full year."

According to Washington-based analysts, Fewnet (the Famine Early Warning System Network), this year's drought and locust invasion had a "modest impact" on grain production in Niger. The 2004 harvest was only 11% below the five-yearly average.

Prices have been rising because traders in Niger have been exporting grain to wealthier neighbouring countries, including Nigeria and Ghana, says Aboudou Karimou Ajibade, country director of Unicef.

"The early warning signs of the famine in November 2004 were not heeded," says Ajibade. "The UN's 'flash appeal' in May raised just 12% of what was needed, both in Niger and in neighbouring Mali."

As the crisis grew, the government of Niger at first refused to distribute free food, fearing that it would disrupt the market. Instead, it offered millet at subsidised prices. But the poorest could still not afford to buy.

"The starvation in Niger is not the inevitable consequence of poverty, or simply the fault of locusts or drought," states Ajibade. "It is also the result of a belief that the free market can solve the problems of one of the world's poorest countries."

Hamsou is the oldest person I meet in Niger, and the most serene. In a country where life expectancy is just 45, at 65 she has outlived most of the men and women in her community. She is the only woman present at the meeting of elders in Zibane village, 80km from Tillabery, and when she speaks the whole gathering goes quiet.

"In my whole lifetime, I have not seen a famine like this," she says. "First we had the drought, then the locusts came. I went out to the fields early in the morning. Huge yellow locusts had descended like a storm. Everything, the earth, the trees were covered. They ate everything."

By the time Plan Niger started free distribution in the village of Zibane, the price of grain has skyrocketed. A 100kg bag of millet went from 8,000 West African francs (around £9) to 22,000 francs (£25). Rice tripled in price.

"We did not have any choice in food," she continues. "Whatever we found, we ate. Here bran is given to animals. During the famine, the animals died and so we ate bran. Men had to go to neighbouring countries to try and find work but we as women do not have the heart to leave our families. So it was the women and children who suffered the most.

"I am not a literate woman and the only experience I have is that of the life I have lived," she says. "At 65 I do not have a lot of days left. My wish now is simply to have enough food for my family and to see my community survive. That's the best wish, until the end of my life."

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