

THE BIG HEAT

In a bid to end malnutrition in Adjumani district, Plan Uganda has a project called REMAC-NiE to address the nutritional challenges, writes Umar Nsubuga

Malnutrition, a threat to

Jacqueline Mandera, 25, started living with her boyfriend five years ago in Agojjo Refugee Settlement Camp in Adjumani district. She dreamed of a better future with him, having grown up in a poor family, where she did not get chance to attend school. However, about two years ago, after giving birth, Mandera's boyfriend left the refugee camp to seek a job in Kampala and has never returned.

Mandera's excitement about motherhood and hope for a better future vanished with him.

Her baby suffered severe malnutrition and, at two-and-a-half years, the child looks like a one-year-old.

Now vending fried cassava in Agojjo, Mandera says her child has never drunk milk because she cannot afford it.

The child cannot stand; her belly is swollen; her hair brown and she is sickly, all signs pointing to malnutrition.

"I thought that my baby had been bewitched," Mandera says.

Fortunately for Mandera and other parents with malnourished children in Adjumani, there is a ray of hope, courtesy of Plan International. The organisation came up with Reach Every Mother And Child with Nutrition in Emergency (REMAC-NiE) project.

"At the camp, I was told that my baby girl was malnourished. I was advised to give her a balanced diet and the organisation gave me different foods and also taught me how to feed her," Mandera says.

Cissy Kaamu, the national health programme manager at Plan International Uganda, says despite Uganda being referred to as a food basket, owing to its fertile soils and climate favourable for agriculture, Ugandan children still suffer from malnutrition.

She says parents and guardians are ignorant about the proper manner in which to feed their children. In addition, poverty is still a challenge.

Malnutrition refers to a condition where one does not have the right nutritional composition for one's body. This is manifested through undernutrition or overnutrition.

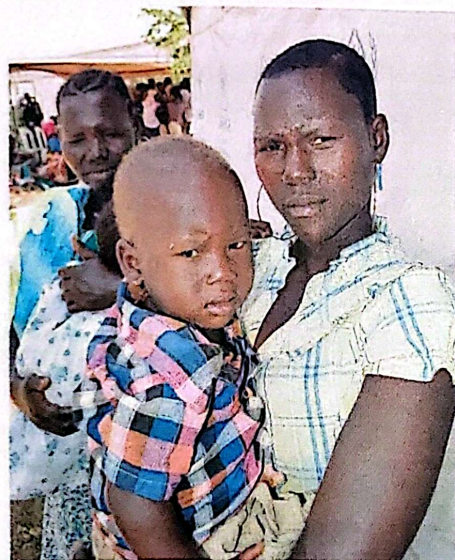
Fighting malnutrition

According to Kaamu, the REMAC-NiE project is being implemented in Agojjo settlement and four villages in the host communities, including Biangiba, Malera, Duba and Agojo central.

She says the intervention is targeting children aged zero to 14 years with emphasis on children aged zero-five,



The staff of Plan Uganda serving food to the refugees living in Adjumani district. Photos by Umar Nsubuga



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pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, especially teenage ones.

Dr Harriet Aciro, a medical officer in Adjumani General Hospital, says Uganda's biggest challenge is undernutrition, especially in children under the age of five. This is manifested in underweight, stunting and wasting.

Indeed, statistics from the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2011 indicate that more than two million children below the age of five are stunted and about 250,000 children in this age group suffer from severe malnutrition every year and are in need of medical treatment.

"Feeding a child on only

Why REMAC-NiE project is implemented

Molly Adokorach, the project co-ordinator REMAC-NiE, says, the intervention is being implemented using the positive deviance/hearth model (PD hearth). "A PD hearth nutrition programme is a home and neighbourhood-based nutrition one for children at risk of protein-energy malnutrition in developing countries."

According to Adokorach, the programme uses the "positive deviance" approach to identify those behaviours practised by the mothers or caregivers of well-nourished children from poor families and transfer such positive practices to others in the community with malnourished children.

She adds that another component of the programme is food security through empowering farmers' groups with knowledge and skills for good agricultural practices.

Expected results

Adokorach says preventive primary healthcare and curative service are improved by ensuring increased access to health promotion awareness, nutrition assessments and treatment of some children under five

Since the REMAC project started, households have increased gardening and food production in the refugee settlements and host communities.

According to Cissy Kaamu, the national health programme manager at Plan International Uganda, households have increased access to sustainable and improved water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and children living in violence free communities.

Uganda has made remarkable strides in improving the welfare of the population in the past 20 years, but some key welfare issues, especially regarding nutritional status, are still wanting.

one type of food leads to malnutrition because it will deny the body of other

essential nutrients. Children should be fed properly and given proper medical care

FACT BOX

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for their mental and physical growth," Dr Aciro advises. James Odongo, the senior portfolio manager for Plan Uganda, says there are parents who have enough food, but prepare it poorly.

"We need to educate mothers on how best to cook the food because it loses its nutrients if it is prepared using wrong methods," Odongo says.

He also cautions mothers against using polythene bags to steam the food as this is deadly.

Because of the high cost of banana leaves, he says, many people, especially in urban areas, steam their food with polythene bags.

Community response

Jackie Ovizia, a resident of Ciforo, welcomed the project. "The fact that the project is going to focus on children, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and not only to teach us about good feeding, but also to facilitate us to learn good agricultural practices to improve food security, makes it good for our community."

Beatrice Mundrua, of Agojjo settlement, says: "Plan has really given us good services. This is an impression that there is need for the services to be brought near to the community."

Prevention of malnutrition

The research by REMAC-NiE project shows that malnutrition starts before birth and for children in Uganda, about 11% of children are born stunted and about 16% are likely to be wasted at birth.

The first 1,000 days of a child's life include the nine months before they are born and the first two years of development.

This, as Dr Aciro explains, greatly impacts a child's cognitive, motor and social-emotional skills, as well as physical growth and development.

Eating fruits

The REMAC-NiE research says fruits should be eaten alone or