

DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD 2009

Theme: Africa fit for Children: Call for accelerated action towards their survival

Keeping children alive, healthy and thriving

The birth and raising of a child should be a source of joy for every parent and community. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many homesteads across the country. Every day, about 400 Kenyan families are in mourning because a child has died. In most of these cases, the child dies within the first month of life, even before the parents have had a chance to savour the joy of parenthood. On a national scale, the last Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, which was conducted in 2003, revealed that the situation was getting worse. Kenya was losing 115 children out of every 1,000 children born alive. Kenya also has one of the highest numbers of newborn deaths in Africa, with about 43,600 children dying before they are a month old.

A more recent survey has shown a slight improvement in child survival. The number of children who die before their fifth birthday has reduced to 92 out of every 1,000 children born alive. But this is still unacceptably high. When Kenya signed onto the Millennium Development Goals, it committed itself to reduce these deaths from 115 to 33.

It will clearly take the efforts of every all Kenyans, the government, through its ministries and institutions, development partners and leaders at all levels to reduce the number of children who are dying every day and ensure that all children are born safely, and remain alive, healthy and thrive into adulthood.

The theme of this year's Day of the African Child is, **Africa Fit for Children: Call for Accelerated Action towards their survival.** It is as applicable for Kenya as it is for all African countries struggling with high figures of child deaths and poor health status for children. And this action must come from everyone.

What is killing Kenya's children?

About a quarter of child deaths are of babies in their first month of life as a result of newborn conditions, such as infections, asphyxia or breathing difficulty and complications arising from a preterm birth. Up to 10 per cent of babies are born with low birth weight.

Other factors contributing to the poor child health status are: malnutrition, a high incidence of diseases, inappropriate healthcare and hygienic practices at household level, poor environmental and living conditions, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Poor access to health services, long distances to health facilities, inadequacies in the healthcare system, including lack of drugs, supplies, personnel, and compounding poverty, are also contributory factors.

Other important causes are acute respiratory infections/pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria, HIV infection and AIDS. All these conditions are made worse by high levels of malnutrition or low immunisation levels. More than a half of all child deaths are associated with malnutrition.

Death of mothers, which may occur due to a range of complications that may arise during pregnancy, at delivery and in the postpartum period and other pre-existing



A baby receives the polio vaccine during a recent campaign in Nairobi. The Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation is emphasising routine immunisation to prevent outbreaks. Photo/UNICEF Kenya.

Why do we mark the Day of The African Child?

The Day of the African Child is being celebrated today, Tuesday June 16. This date was set aside in 1991 by the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union or "AU") to remember the hundreds of African children who were killed in 1976 in Soweto, South Africa, when they took to the streets to protest against the inferior quality of their education. The children were also protesting the use of Afrikaans as a language of instruction rather than their own languages in schools. More than 500 children were killed on that day by police in what has been known to date as the 'Soweto Massacre'. This year's theme for the Day of

the African Child is 'Africa Fit for Children: Call for Accelerated Action towards their survival'. It seeks to answer questions such as why do children die so young? Are they in good health? Do they have access to good medical care? Do they have clean water to drink? Do they have enough of the right food to eat to ensure they grow up healthy and that they do not succumb to preventable diseases? What is the community doing about these issues? The right to survival and development remains unfulfilled for many children in Africa. This is because many African countries face

challenges such as lack of proper water and sanitation services, lack of food, lack of proper health care and quality education and protection systems for children, as well as lack of proper governance to put all these in place. As a result, many children die at infancy, or before their fifth birthday. This is due to preventable diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, measles, cholera etc. Malnutrition, caused by lack of enough food to eat and a balanced diet, is also a big underlying cause of all these diseases and premature deaths. It also makes children not to reach their full mental and physical potential.

conditions, also contributes to poor health and even death of babies since maternal survival is directly linked to the wellbeing of infants and children under five.

**Must all these children die?**  
Kenya doesn't have to lose its children at

such an alarming rate. There is evidence that nine out of ten deaths of children can easily be prevented if the right action is taken in time to save their lives.

But children are dying because families do not have either access to simple low-cost and highly effective ways to save lives, or the

Hand washing with soap

Evidence has shown that hand washing with soap is an effective way of preventing diarrhoea. Mothers and care-givers must remember to wash their hands with soap during these critical moments: After visiting the toilet, before preparing food, before eating food or feeding the baby and after handling the baby's faeces while changing and cleaning them. Children should also be taught to wash their hands with soap during these moments.

**What can the Government do ?**  
Several notable achievements have been made in efforts to reduce the causes of childhood morbidity and mortality, especially with regards to malaria, vaccine preventable diseases, acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and in improving water and sanitation. There still, however, needs to be a significant scaling up of activities related to specific targets both in terms of programme delivery and financing.

The health sector faces several challenges and utilisation of services remains low. The cost of services and long distances to cover in reaching the health facilities are limiting factors to utilising health services. About 47 per cent of the population travels more than 5 kms to reach a health facility (KIHBS 2007). The health sector also suffers from a chronic staff shortage, especially in rural areas. Kenya has a doctor population ratio of 15/100,000 and a

nurse population ratio of 133/100,000. The deficient knowledge and skills of health workers, lack of equipment and supplies and other facilities necessary for basic and comprehensive Essential Obstetric Care (EOC), including Emergency Obstetric and Essential Newborn Care (ENC) further compromise services. The government must, therefore, invest more in the sector by to improve access to and utilisation of health services.

knowledge to do this. Some of these simple ways are: Exclusive breastfeeding, giving children the right foods in the right quantities, ensuring children under the age of five receive Vitamin A every six months to protect them from disease, giving children safe water and ensuring a clean and hygienic environment, taking children for growth monitoring and health checks every six months, ensuring children sleep under insecticide treated mosquito nets to protect them from malaria, continued feeding and increased fluid intake when the child has diarrhoea, taking a child to a health centre or hospital for prompt treatment of malaria and pneumonia, ensuring the child completes immunization and taking action to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV.

For example, research has shown that giving a baby nothing but breast milk for the first six months of life, and then continuing breastfeeding together with other foods until the child is two years old, can reduce child deaths significantly. Yet only three per cent of Kenyan infants are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. This means that 97 per cent of Kenyan babies are being exposed, daily, to an increased risk of disease and have lowered immunity because they are given foods and drinks other than breast milk before six months of age.

What can families and communities do?

Families and communities must take action to keep children alive, healthy and thriving, until they grow into adults capable of taking care of themselves.

**Breastfeeding:** Mothers should be encouraged and supported to give their babies nothing but breast milk from the time they are born, until the age of six, then introduce other foods (as advised at the health centre) in addition to breast milk, until the baby is two years old.

**Immunisation:** Parents and care-givers must ensure the baby completes immunization within the first year as advised at the health centre

**Growth monitoring:** All children under the age of five should be taken to the health centre every six months for growth monitoring, de-worming where needed and to receive Vitamin A supplementation to protect them from disease. Parents and caregivers will also receive advice on how to feed the child and keep them healthy and thriving.

**Malaria:** All children under five years and pregnant women must sleep under insecticide treated nets to protect them from malaria and any child suspected of having malaria must be taken to the health centre for prompt attention.

**Clean water:** Caregivers should ensure all drinking water is clean and safe before giving it to children.

**Hygiene:** Caregivers and children must wash their hands with soap to prevent diarrhoeal diseases. The environment at home should be kept clean at all times.

**Sanitation:** Faeces should be disposed of in latrines and toilets, and these must be kept clean at all times.