

# Six million Ethiopian children at risk of malnutrition as crops fail and prices rise

- [Xan Rice](#) in Nairobi
- [The Guardian](#),
- Wednesday May 21 2008
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This article appeared in [the Guardian](#) on [Wednesday May 21 2008](#) . It was last updated at 12:08 on May 21 2008.

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Xan Rice reports from East Africa

Up to 6 million children under the age of five are at risk of malnutrition in Ethiopia because of rising cereal prices and the failure of rains, the UN's children agency, Unicef, has warned.

Dry spells across much of the country since last September have led to big food shortages, humanitarian agencies say. In recent weeks the effects have become visible, with increases in cases of kwashiorkor and severe acute malnutrition, particularly in southern Ethiopia, where 126,000 children require urgent therapeutic treatment.

John Holmes, the UN's undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, said he was deeply concerned by Ethiopia's food insecurity, the worst since the drought-related humanitarian crisis in 2003.

With crops expected to fail following a poor March to May rainy season, which in good years allows farmers to produce a second crop, the situation is expected to worsen.

"We will need a rapid scaling up of resources, especially food and nutritional supplies, to make increased life-saving aid a reality," Holmes said.

Samuel Akale, a nutritionist with the government's disaster prevention agency, warned that the situation would get worse. "The number of severely malnourished will increase, and then they'll die," he told Associated Press.

Ethiopia has made gains in reducing dependency on food relief, and has cut its infant mortality rate by a quarter over the past five years. But with poverty still widespread, and

the country host to 80 million people, the second largest population in sub-Saharan Africa, it remains deeply susceptible to the weather's vagaries.

The World Food Programme (WFP) says that besides the 8 million people supported by a long-term food safety net system, at least 3.4 million people are in need of emergency humanitarian aid. It appealed for an urgent response from donors, citing a 183,000 tonne food shortfall, which would cost \$147m (nearly £75m) to bridge.

Unicef is asking for \$50m, but there are concerns that the international focus on disasters in China and Burma will see the appeal fall short. An earlier request for \$20m to fund its emergency nutrition programme raised \$1m.

The worst hit areas are the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region, the Somalia region, and Oromiya, where the number of severely malnourished children admitted to one Unicef-supported hospital increased from 26 to 61 over the past week. Livestock losses are also growing.

There is also increasing concern about the northern regions of Afar, Amhara and Tigray, where crop failure is expected following disappointing rains. Rising global costs of fuel, fertiliser and staple foods are compounding the problem, especially for the poorest Ethiopians. In the six months to February, the price of maize and sorghum nearly doubled, according to the WFP, while wheat jumped by 54%.

"The food supply in markets is limited, and many people cannot afford to buy what is needed for their families," said Peter Smerdon, a WFP spokesman. "They are having to resort to extreme survival strategies."

Nearby countries are experiencing similar difficulties in coping with drought. About 600,000 people in Uganda's eastern Karamoja region are receiving food aid, while more than 2 million Somalis, many of them displaced by war, are reliant on humanitarian relief.