

Fighting Global Malnutrition Locally

By: Molly Theobald

Every year, 5 million children worldwide die from malnutrition-related causes, including immune-system deficiency, increased risk of infection, decreased bone density, and starvation. But a variety of local efforts are hoping to turn things around. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country struggling with internal conflict, food shortages, and poverty, thousands of lives are threatened by acute malnutrition. When a child is brought to one of the therapeutic Stabilization Centers at regional hospitals, run by the Congolese Ministry of Health with support from the organization Action Against Hunger, they receive rations of specially formulated Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF). RUTF—such as Plumpy’nut, a peanut butter-based food produced by the French company Nutriset—is infused with vitamins and minerals and is used to quickly rehabilitate children suffering from malnutrition.

RUTF is packaged and requires no preparation or refrigeration. It can be administered at home, allowing families to avoid having to travel to far-off medical centers or pay for long and expensive stays at hospitals. It is also very effective. After about 40 days of two or three servings of RUTF per day, a child can reach a healthy weight. During the 2005 food crisis in the Maradi region of Niger, the non-profit Doctors Without Borders treated 40,000 severely malnourished children using RUTF and saw a recovery rate of 90 percent.

In addition to obtaining Plumpy’nut from UNICEF or directly from Nutriset in France, Action Against Hunger purchases it from Amwili, a local producer that has partnered with Nutriset. By providing a local source of RUTF, Lubumbashi-based Amwili frees the treatment centers from dependency on supplies imported from Europe. Local production also improves livelihoods by creating jobs, and many organizations around the world are working to link local farmers to RUTF production in order to provide an improved and consistent source of income.

In Haiti, the Zanmi Agrikol Program, run by the organization Partners in Health, is improving agricultural capacity and household food security, in addition to treating malnutrition, by training and contracting with local peanut farmers who provide the ingredients for locally produced RUTF. Currently the project provides malnutrition treatment and prevention for 5,000 children; agriculture training and support to 1,240 families; and has contracts with over 100 local peanut farmers. Additionally, the organization Meds & Food for Kids relies on local ingredients and Haitian producers to make its own brand of RUTF, called Medika Manba or “peanut butter medicine.” Meds & Food for Kids saw a significant increase in demand for Medika Manba after

the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti earlier this year, and many malnourished children were treated with a locally made RUTF that provides the additional benefit of helping to restore the country's fragile economy.

Companies like Nutriset in France and Valid International in the United Kingdom offer instruction manuals for local production of their specific RUTF products and partner with local producers in countries struggling with malnutrition across sub-Saharan Africa. Action Against Hunger, for example, also purchases Plumpy'nut from a producer in Nairobi, Kenya, called INSTA—a partner of Valid International—to distribute RUTF to its programs throughout East Africa.

In Ghana, the New Frontier Farmers and Processor group is processing the leaves of moringa trees, which are high in protein and other valuable nutrients, into powder that can be manufactured into formula for malnourished children. This effort, along with other crop-processing projects, is helping to add value to small-scale farmers' crops and improve the livelihoods of the nearly 5,000 participating farmers.

To read more about how farmers can produce ingredients for local products to improve livelihoods, nutrition, and food security see: Locally Produced Products for Locally Consumed Products, Using Small Businesses to Create Local Markets, and Protecting Wildlife While Improving Food Security, Health, and Livelihoods.