

Health professionals prepared to deal with nutrition when an emergency hits

Interest Story

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BANGKOK, Thailand – With participants coming from ten different countries in Asia, Africa and Middle East, the third regional training on Nutrition in Emergencies invoked lively discussions throughout the two weeks of its course. This was largely thanks to the participants' varying geographical but also professional backgrounds ranging from nutrition and medicine to health development, planning and monitoring.

Nutrition Division Chief Ms. Juno Lawrence Jaffer from U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Mozambique works in the health development sector, and since one year ago has focused primarily on nutrition issues. She wanted to attend the course to deepen her knowledge about the broader context for nutrition programming and nutrition in emergencies.

“The course helped me to understand how being better prepared in the development context can be absolutely critical when facing a nutrition emergency. The knowledge gained during the course not only helps me to strengthen our agency's nutrition programs but also to understand how we can minimize the impact of disasters,” Ms. Jaffer says.

Mozambique is prone to a variety of natural hazards due to its location on the coast line of the Indian Ocean. Also a high level of stunting is a significant problem in the country.

“There are very few trained nutritionists in Mozambique, but the country has recently started a program that provides undergraduate degrees in nutrition. Although the training of these new technical nutrition cadres will be a long process, we are on our way to be better able to respond to disasters,” Ms. Jaffer adds.

New tools to facilitate assessment

Nutrition specialist Mr. Joseph Senesie from UNICEF in Sierra Leone found the research-related contents of the course useful and practical – especially the methodology called Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) that is used in nutrition assessment.

“It was also interesting to learn about how emergencies evolve and about the communication channels used in times of emergencies. We even learned about the use and channeling of the funds, which is very good to know about. When an emergency hits, it's not the time to learn – it's the time to implement,” Mr. Senesie states.

The new knowledge about community management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) programming that Mr. Senesie learned during the course will be useful in his work in Sierra Leone.



Photo by Leila Uotila

A course participant, Ms. Alaa Refai from International Medical Corps in Syria in a meeting during an emergency simulation.

“ The quality of CMAM programming in our country is still insufficient and we are working on improving it at the moment. Knowledge from this course will help us in the development procedures we are working on, ”

Nutrition specialist Mr. Joseph Senesie from UNICEF says.

Children's malnutrition a concern in war torn Syria

Another course participant, Health Program Coordinator Ms. Alaa Refai from International Medical Corps works in war torn Syria. As a consequence of the civil war, malnutrition has become a severe problem in the country.

"Malnutrition is a new problem in Syria and people are not familiar with nutrition issues. The training was really useful for me as it provided the basic skills that I need in dealing with the cases we face at the moment. Community management of acute malnutrition is something I can apply right away," Ms. Refai says.

The price of food in Syria has risen dramatically during the war which results in inadequate portions – also for the children. Local people are also struggling with ensuring a good quality of the nutrition.

"We are trying to raise the awareness that giving just one type of food for the children is not enough. We also provide people with information about the main nutrients that are important for children at each age and give the families advice on where to get the nutrients," Ms. Refai tells.

"Another great concern is that Syrian women are not used to breast feeding and they use formula instead. In emergencies, when people live in shelters where there aren't good practices of hygiene, using formula can have bad effects, so we are encouraging the local women to breast feeding," Ms. Refai adds.

Strengthening the system to cope with nutrition in emergencies in DPRK

Nutrition Officer Dr. Rim Hui Yong from UNICEF in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) attended the course with four other nutrition professionals from his country. Dr. Yong found the course as a good opportunity for the key persons of nutrition programs in DPRK to increase their capacity especially in terms of disaster preparedness.

"We learned about preparing us for disasters and about how we can cope with the situation during an emergency. Also, we gained knowledge about practices during disaster recovery. For me, most useful about the course was to get tools to be able to strengthen the system coping with nutrition in emergencies in DPRK," Dr. Yong states.

The course was a part of the Nutrition in Emergencies Regional Training Initiative (NIERTI) of Department of Nutrition & Food Science, American University of Beirut, Lebanon; Public Health in Emergencies, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center, Thailand; and School of Public Health, Makerere University, Uganda. It was conducted in collaboration with the University College London's Institute for Global Health, UK; and Emergency Nutrition Network (ENN).



Photo by Leila Uotila

Dr. Ri Un Suk and Dr. Kim Yong Ran from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea presenting their future professional goals. Public health nutritionist Mr. Paul Rees-Thomas facilitated the emergency simulation at the end of the course.



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