

A mission to help Africa’s children

Editor’s note: This is the last part of a series on the food crisis in the Horn of Africa. D J Clark talks with a woman who has overseen a UNICEF project to improve the lives of malnourished African children.

By D J CLARK
FOR CHINA DAILY

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — “I was born, brought up and educated in Beijing,” Lu Wei begins, establishing her Chinese credentials as we sit down for an interview in a brightly decorated UNICEF office in the heart of Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa.

Clutching a mug of green tea, Lu begins to describe her journey from her first job at the Capital Institute of Pediatrics in Beijing to running one of the largest health projects in the world. She quickly summarized her current role as the director of UNICEF’s Ethiopia Health Program: “I have an annual budget of \$30 million to support the Ethiopian government to deliver basic health services.”

Over the last five years Lu’s UNICEF project reduced the national child mortality rate by 28 percent, and now she is focused on improving maternal and newborn health.

“In China these days almost every woman gives birth in health facilities with a skilled care provider, a doctor, a midwife, but in Africa only one in 10 has the luxury of receiving skilled care,” she said.

The infant mortality reduction campaign has not impacted the number of children that die in the first few days after birth, with 37 babies in 1,000 not making it through the first month of their life.

In 1990 Lu was seconded by the Chinese government to work on a UNICEF vaccination program in China. At the end of her term she

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LU WEI
DIRECTOR OF UNICEF’S ETHIOPIA HEALTH PROGRAM

decided to stay on and was sent to Pakistan where she was to spend the next four years of her life. “I had a good time there, the Pakistanis are very kind to the Chinese,” she quipped with an engaging smile. From there she went on to Nepal for six years before moving to Africa, first to Nairobi and then to Ethiopia.

“In Africa I shifted my focus to look at maternal and neonatal health, one of the weakest links in the whole health system and the last major frontier to conquer. I have traveled to all the 20 countries in East Africa, which has given me an appreciation of how diverse the region is. It has also made me really appreciate the Chinese healthcare system — how the majority of the population has basic healthcare and a system that is robust enough to deal with emergencies and catastrophes.”

Lu’s mood visibly changed when I moved the conversation away from her memories of the past and asked her about the current food crisis and how it was affecting children in the region.

“Malnutrition is a significant underlying cause for child mortality.

Video
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Acute malnutrition is when a child becomes very thin. You can imagine a typical photograph in a newspaper or a magazine: a bony child with an extended belly. Acute malnutrition can directly kill a baby. Chronic malnutrition, which accounts for about 40 percent of all children in Ethiopia, means that children are shorter than they should be. Chronic malnutrition will not kill the child directly, but it reduces the capacity of the child to resist diseases. So the child becomes more vulnerable to infection.”

Throughout Lu’s responses she kept returning to China, describing how children these days are growing taller as they are better nourished. “But in Africa it is not just about size,” she went on. “Stunting also leads to a reduction in mental capability and reduction in productivity and gives the child less chance of reaching their full potential. Therefore in the Horn of Africa while we deal with the current emergency we also need to bear in mind that children that are not eating properly are also reducing their prospects for the rest of their lives.”

Speaking slowly but with a passion that was very difficult to describe, she explained about changing social traditions that were harming the chances of child survival. “Food is absolutely important but not only food, it is also a way of living. You can have plenty of food but still have a malnourished child in the family,” she said, illustrating the fact that getting families to understand nutritional balance was one of her key challenges.

There was a long pause before I was given an answer to my final question. Aware that there had been some discussion back in China as to why so much aid was being sent



Lu Wei, director of UNICEF’s Ethiopia Health Program, vaccinates a local woman in Ethiopia. PROVIDED BY UNICEF

to the Horn of Africa, I was keen to get her perspective on China’s role in dealing with the humanitarian problem.

“China is the second biggest economy in the world now and in an interdependent world we need to fulfill our international obligations.

Chinese culture advocates giving and helping others. We help our neighbors, and it’s a good traditional value I would like to see kept. It is always better to help others. I know that every government should take responsibility for its own people but in the Somali region where there is

internal fighting it is the women and children who end up suffering.

“This makes it an international obligation to step in and help. The refugees from Somalia to Ethiopia right now are arriving in such a condition that if we don’t help they will die,” she said.

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