



AFRICA/NIGER - Infant mortality rate decreases, but malnutrition and food insecurity increases

Niamey (Agency) - Since 1998, Niger has almost halved the rate of infant mortality, a significant drop that has highlighted the benefits of universal free health care for children and pregnant women, as well as the increase of donors who give funding for the health care of the most vulnerable. This is what emerges in a study recently published by The Lancet. The country went from 226 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1998 to 128 deaths in 2009, a 5.1% reduction in the annual rate. In addition, thanks to the new strategies by the Government together with its local partners, the number of children aged 24-35 months with rickets and growth disorders has also reduced, to whom a better diet with vitamin A supplements, care for the treatment of diarrhea, fever, malaria, pneumonia, and vaccinations are offered. However, according to the latest UNICEF data, in 2012 Niger has recorded the highest number of malnourished children in the Sahel region in addition to severe food insecurity. More than 330 000 children under 5 years of age are at risk of malnutrition. In the region, heavy drought and rising food prices have left more than 18 million people suffering from hunger. Since the mid-'90s, the government has been committed to ensuring universal access to basic health care assistance for women and children, focusing on measures to reduce deaths from malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea and measles which had contributed to at least 60% of deaths among children under 5 years of age before adequate safety measures were taken. Other health centers in remote regions have also been built and trained personnel have been formed. Between 1998 and 2010, official assistance increased by 77%. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 04/10/2012)