

Breakthroughs for children

Saving children's lives by predicting food crises

Save the Children has changed the way the world anticipates and responds to food crises. Our unique approach, which paints an accurate picture of how households buy and produce food, enables governments and aid agencies to predict which families are least likely to survive disasters such as flood, drought or sudden changes in the local market that put food out of reach of poor people.

People don't generally suffer famine because there is no food, but because many families can't get food, or because the food that is available is too expensive for them to afford. Before the 1990s, systems for predicting famine and mitigating its effects were based on complex, inflexible questionnaires that were difficult to analyse and often missed important local information.

In the 1990s, Save the Children came up with a creative solution. We developed the Household Economy Approach, which involves group discussions, and interviews with villagers, government officials and, for example, local traders. This local knowledge is used to identify and describe the issues facing different types of households in a particular area, and to identify the people most at risk, and the best strategies to help them cope.

Save the Children has busted the myth that most people in rural Africa grow their own food. We discovered that, in countries from Swaziland to Sudan, most families have to buy at least half their food with money they've earned doing casual labour. Losing their income or spiralling prices are therefore as devastating as destruction of crops or poor harvests.

While the household economy approach is mainly used to predict famine, it is also used in other settings, including responding to emergencies, like after the tsunami, or examining the impact of charging for healthcare. It also helps us understand the roles children play to help their families - doing things like fishing, herding animals or caring for younger siblings. This kind of information about family roles helps governments make policies that support households and that also promote children's right to education, play and free time.

Save the Children has been ambitious about using the Household Economy Approach (HEA) to achieve dramatic changes for children. The approach is now used in 123 countries. Governments, UN agencies, NGOs and, crucially, the US-funded Famine and Early Warning Systems Network, have adopted the approach. In 2005/06, 23 million people in Africa received emergency aid after HEA assessments had been carried out. More than half of these were children.