

Thirty years of Plumpy'Nut®:

When humanitarian action crossed with scientific innovation



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About 28 years ago, in Afghanistan's central highland of Hazarajat, living under a brutal Taliban blockade, I watched my baby brother starve to death. Mohammad, Mamdo, we called him, was a typical little baby. Thick black hair. Light brown skin. Full of life. He never made it from sitting on his own to crawling.

Mohammad was just one among thousands of babies to starve to death in our region that year. We survived on very little. For us, nothing like Plumpy'Nut® existed then. There was no packet that could have saved him.

That is what makes the science behind it so remarkable to me.

The story of Plumpy'Nut® began with a question. In the 1990s, French food engineer, Michel Lescanne, and French paediatrician, André Brien, were working with paediatric nutrition experts and humanitarian actors who were struggling to treat children suffering from severe malnutrition in some of the world's most challenging settings. Hospital-based treatments worked, but too many children never reached a hospital. The challenge was to create something scientifically robust yet simple enough to be used anywhere.

Together, they helped pioneer a radically different approach: a nutrient-rich paste that required no clean water, no refrigeration, and no preparation. From that idea came Plumpy'Nut®, the first Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF). What looked like a simple foil sachet became one of the most important public health innovations of recent decades, changing severe acute malnutrition from a condition that often required hospitalisation into one that could be treated within families and communities, bringing lifesaving care within reach of millions of children.

The numbers still stop me. Between 2003 and 2025, over 8.7 billion sachets have been delivered around the world. Nearly 90% of children treated for severe acute



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malnutrition with it recover, often within weeks. In 2025 alone, over nine million children were treated. Multiply that recovery across three decades, and it comes to tens of millions of children who are alive today because of an idea born in a laboratory in the 1990s.

I think of them scattered across Sudan, Yemen, Gaza, Somalia, Mali, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and many other countries where children still go hungry because of conflict, climate shocks, and poverty. More than twelve million children worldwide currently suffer from severe wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition. The need has never gone away. But unlike in Mamdo's time, there is now something that works, that is cheap to produce, and that fits in the palm of a mother's hand.

As emphasised by Adeline Lescanne, CEO of Groupe Nutriset and daughter of Michel Lescanne, "Over the last thirty years, science has proven that child wasting is not an inevitable tragedy, but a treatable condition. However, technology alone is not enough. Facing growing climate pressures and

humanitarian crises, we need sustained political commitment, continuous research in nutrition science, and strong public-private partnerships to ensure no child is left behind." Beyond the scientific formulation, the true breakthrough lies in scaling access. Through Nutriset's network of local producers, the Plumpyfield® network, a significant share of these life-saving products is manufactured directly in or near countries with high malnutrition burdens, such as Niger, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Haiti. This model not only speeds up emergency response and reduces supply chain risks but also contributes to local economic resilience and agricultural development.

Innovation did not stop with Plumpy'Nut®. To meet the full spectrum of nutritional threats, Nutriset's researchers continue to refine specialised formulations, from preventive nutrient supplements for pregnant women and young infants (such as SQ-LNS) to targeted solutions for complex health conditions. Research in nutritional science remains essential to adapt to changing dietary needs and environmental challenges.

It was not there to save my little Mohammad's life, but it has been there for tens of millions like him. And because of this, hundreds of millions of parents did not have to bury their babies in small graves.

Now more than ever, as we mark thirty years since this small packet was invented, we must redouble our commitment to make sure it reaches every child, everywhere, who needs it.