

Handout 1: Case Study: Ifrah's Story

MOGADISHU, Somalia (November 21, 2012) — Ten-month-old Ifrah was born in 2011 as the first famine declared in more than 20 years in Africa held its grip on the village in which her family has lived for generations. Famine conditions ended in February 2012.

Her mother, Fatuma Hassan, desperately hungry herself, struggled to feed her. What little food there was in the markets was too expensive, and Ifrah become sicker and sicker.

Today, she is a smiling, healthy child whose first months in which she suffered diarrhea and chest infections are “only like a bad memory,” Fatuma says.

But more than two million Somalis are still considered to be at ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’ levels. In the fall of 2012, 236,000 children were badly malnourished.

Hassan had fled her village in May of 2012, bringing Ifrah, her brother and sister to a camp in the capital city of Mogadishu.

At the camp, health workers sent Ifrah and her family to Wadajir Health Center, where UNICEF supports a Somali organization that treats malnourished children.

Ifrah is one of 90,000 severely malnourished children under five years old who have been helped in more than 1,200 centers funded by UNICEF across southern Somalia.

“If this health center was not here, I don’t know where else I could have taken Ifrah,” says Fatumah.

“The help that they gave her, I am sure, saved her life. Without it, we had nothing; there was no money, and I do not know where I could have bought food for her.”

At the health center children like Ifrah are closely examined every week. They are weighed, their temperatures are taken, and the thickness of their upper arms is measured; these are all ways that health workers can measure how well-nourished a child is.

A week’s supply of a peanut-based paste with a lot of nutrients is given to the mothers of malnourished children who are more than six months old. The paste both helps return them to health and, along with medicine, beats back the effects of malnutrition. This specially formulated therapeutic food has made a huge difference to tens of thousands of children already suffering from serious malnutrition, like Ifrah.

Elsewhere in the tin-roofed, brick-walled health center at Wadajir, nurses give children antibiotics and deworming medicines, and immunizations are given to prevent diseases like measles.

Protecting children from malnutrition is not just about giving food. The workers also take care of the children's overall health, and teach their mothers about the importance of clean water and good sanitation. The mothers are also taught about the importance of breastfeeding their babies for their first six months. These are all important ways to fight some of the causes of malnutrition including diarrhea.

Even though the famine in Somalia has ended, there is still a lot of work to be done. As one of the UNICEF workers in Somalia said, "It is not enough to give help during the worst times, like the famine, and then to stop helping when that improves. There are still more children every day who need help."