

DJIBOUTI

Parents participate in the fight against severe child malnutrition

Twenty-four-year-old Hodan Mohamed is proud and prolix when she talks about the Balbala 2 nutrition centre, located in a slum suburb of Djibouti's capital city. Like many poor people and vulnerable groups of Balbala slum, Hodan lives in a small shelter made of metal and tarpaulin sheets. She does not have access to safe drinking water nor to electricity. Since her childhood she has been struggling for survival. Her parents died in Somaliland, in a small village near Hargeisa, when she was nine years old. After she was orphaned, she lived with some relatives who migrated to Djibouti town one year later. In Djibouti, life was not easy. She had to work as a baby-sitter even though she was a child. She got pregnant at the age of 17 and has been married twice since then. Currently she is also pregnant, divorced and living with a young cousin and her three children.

A smile lit up her face when she says that she is so lucky to participate in the programme offered by the Balbala 2 nutrition centre for children and mothers. "It's like a dream. Every day my three-year-old daughter Malika and I are welcome at the Centre. This place is a rescue for my daughter and a lot of other children suffering from malnutrition. The atmosphere is friendly, there are at least 15 beds and the air conditioner is refreshing. In addition, there is a special room for recreation activities equipped with toys and a TV set."

Of the 10 supplementary feeding centres supported by UNICEF in Djibouti's capital city, Balbala 2 is a special one. Whilst in the other centres children who suffer malnutrition without complications only receive supplementary feeding, at Balbala 2 mothers participate in nutrition education and monitoring activities, child feeding, and food distribution. They also learn to cook available and affordable foodstuffs. Balbala 2 nutrition centre aims to develop women's skills so that in their daily lives they feed their children efficiently with locally available nutritious food. "Most of the time, severe malnutrition is occurring not only because parents are poor, but because they lack knowledge about child feeding. The challenge is to give each mother the necessary nutrition skills to ensure the decrease of severe malnutrition cases," says the Director of Balbala 2 nutrition centre, Dr. Madian.

Hodan is delighted to participate in the centre's nutrition programme. "My daughter is recovering weight; she is smiling again and playing with other children. She now enjoys eating the food I prepare myself. In this centre I am learning a lot about nutrition and child feeding. This gives me self-confidence and hope for the future of my children. I will share the knowledge gained with my family and neighbours."