

SOMALIA

A gift of life – supporting displaced families

Fatima and her four-year old son fled fighting in Mogadishu early this year to save their lives. They had no idea that Fatima's son would almost lose his life to cholera in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) that they now call home in the heart of southern Somalia.

“When we arrived in this camp for displaced people, my son fell ill and became unconscious,” recalls Fatima. “Luckily a doctor in the hospital nearby saved his life, but there were so many people who were ill in this camp and not getting better. It was hardest on the babies who become ill so quickly that there was nothing we could do. Sometimes people would sleep in their own feces because they were too weak to move,” she adds.

To respond to this problem and guard against future cholera outbreaks, UNICEF, in partnership with a local water committee, helped to clean the polluted well, seal it and install a handpump to prevent water contamination. The UNICEF team also worked with local authorities to put in place a monitoring system to assess the health of displaced families in the camp and to refer any cholera cases to the nearby hospital.

“We work in several IDP camps to encourage local communities to take on the task of building, repairing and maintaining their water and sanitation facilities,” explains Douglas Abuuru, UNICEF's Project Officer in the region.

This approach seems to be working. Local residents in this Baidoa IDP camp maintain and chlorinate the well on a regular basis. They have even organized an informal class on hygiene and constructed eight latrines, so that both men and women can have their privacy.

“Before the latrines were built we would have to go behind the bush,” confides eight-year old Mariana. “It always smelled bad and it was very dirty. I didn't like the boys seeing me go to the bathroom. I felt embarrassed. But now they can't see a thing!”

Monthly visits by a mobile health care team, supported by UNICEF, have noted a decline in the incidence of water-borne diseases in the camp.

“We learned earlier this year about the importance of washing your hands with soap before eating, as well as how rubbish littered around the camp could be a breeding ground for disease,” explains Mohammed, another young camp resident. “So we started a rubbish collection programme that reduced the number of plastic bags and other refuse in our camp by about 80 per cent. UNICEF

helped by giving us wheelbarrows and other rubbish collection tools. We designated a collection site where all trash is deposited on a daily basis and burnt once a week.”

“We hope that people like Fatima and Mohamed will one day be able to return to their homes,” says Abuuru. “But until they do, they have a right to clean water, adequate sanitation and basic health care. And when they are able to take action and run some of these programmes themselves, this also improves their ability to cope with all the hardships they face.”