

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

DJIBOUTI

SEVERE MALNUTRITION HITS CHILDREN FROM PASTORAL FAMILIES RECENTLY SETTLED DOWN IN DJIBOUTI'S SLUM AREAS

A mother of eight, 40-year-old Jano Aden lives in Moustiquaire, a quarter of Hayabley slum, located 6 kilometres from the centre of Djibouti, the capital city. Like many poor people and vulnerable groups in Hayabley slum, Mrs. Jano dwells in a small 10m² shelter made up of bits and pieces cobbled together. And like thousands of families living in similar conditions, she lacks access to drinkable water and electricity. "Moustiquaire, she says bitterly, is like the end of the road, where people who don't know where to go settle down."

Mrs. Jano, her husband and their children came from Ethiopia in June 2006, when the family lost their herd after a dramatic drought. "I was pregnant of little Gouled, my last son. He is the only one to be born in Djibouti," she explains with a hardly audible voice.

Life is not easy for the family. In 2007, her husband got sick and died of tuberculosis, a disease that could have been treated if rapidly detected and properly managed. He was already very ill when he finally decided to go to Hayabley's community health centre. For several months, he had ignored the disease and spent his time looking for a job down town to feed his children. He is one of thousands of invisible victims of poverty and illiteracy, who die every year in the slums of the Horn of Africa.

Now it is the responsibility of the eldest children (a son and two daughters aged 25, 22, and 20 years respectively) to go down town every single day and bring back some money for the family's survival. They can hardly afford two meagre meals per day, let alone three meals. A few months ago, severely hit by malnutrition – he weighed only 7.8 kg for 78.5 cm – Gouled was admitted to the UNICEF-supported nutrition programme at Hayabley's community health centre.

Mrs. Jano takes him to the health centre once a week and comes back home with a ration of therapeutic food (Plumpy'nut). Little Gouled feels better now. A smile lit up her face when she looks at him moving and shouting in the small shelter. In five weeks, his weight has increased up to 9 kg, which indicates a good recovery. "One month ago, Gouled was not able to move his head. It is unbelievable. Plumpy'nut is a really magic meal!" Mrs. Jano stresses.

Gouled was identified by one of 16 volunteers and community workers operating within the nutrition programme around Hayabley's community health centre. Eighty per cent of the volunteers are women. "The community workers have definitely contributed to the improvement of the national nutrition programme," says Ms. Neima, the young doctor in charge of the health centre. "They are from the communities, they know how to approach and convince families and how to explain the benefits their children can get from the nutrition programme."

UNICEF is trying to raise additional funds to extend the coverage of the nutrition programme and reach the 25,000 invisible children suffering from acute malnutrition throughout Djibouti. The rate of global acute malnutrition in the country is approximately 17 per cent among children under age five and reaches 25 per cent in the North-West.