

Case Study 4D.

Somalia — Nutrition during an acute watery diarrhea and cholera outbreak

Context

The prolonged conflict in Somalia has led to a protracted state of emergency. Children under five years old in Somalia have experienced undernutrition for decades. A significant deterioration in the food security situation in 2011, coupled with large-scale displacements and limited humanitarian access to critical areas, led to a drastic increase in cases of acute undernutrition. In June 2011, a state of famine was declared in Southern Somalia with global acute malnutrition (GAM) prevalence exceeding 30% in most livelihood zones and a crude death rate exceeding the WHO classification of an emergency (= or >2/10,000/day). Agencies scrambled to scale up their interventions. A massive displacement of population ensued as people moved from rural areas, which had no food or humanitarian access, towards select urban areas. The congregation in urban areas put pressure on all services, in particular, Health and WASH. An acute watery diarrhea (AWD) and cholera outbreak followed quickly behind.

Activities and channels

The Nutrition team at UNICEF Somalia understood that nutrition sites and feeding centers were at high risk of receiving beneficiaries with AWD/cholera. There was a need to provide guidance on how to deal with the outbreak so as to minimize its effects and spread, especially for the vulnerable undernourished population. With nutrition sites and staff being already overwhelmed, it was clear that the guidance had to be clear and brief.

A call for materials to the international community turned up only two examples where specific guidance had been drafted — recent Haiti and Zimbabwe cholera outbreaks. These materials were then adapted, in a collaboration between the Nutrition and WASH sections, to the Somalia context and program and translated into Somali. Four guidance notes for Nutrition were created:

- Breastfeeding mothers in cholera treatment centers
- Cholera and severe acute malnutrition
- AWD/cholera and outpatient therapeutic programs
- Infant and young child feeding (IYCF) during diarrhea and cholera outbreaks

A further four guidelines for WASH were created:

- Hygiene at burial sites
- WASH at feeding centers
- WASH in schools and school feeding centers
- WASH at cholera treatment centers

Nutrition organizations and WASH organizations were teamed together so that every nutrition center and feeding center was supported by a team of experts to provide WASH services and monitor hygiene.

In addition, the WASH and Nutrition sections worked together to develop joint key messages for mass communication campaigns. These focused on how to prevent cholera transmission through good hygiene and sanitation and how to breastfeed safely.

Results

Although there were isolated cases of AWD/cholera in some camps in Mogadishu and on the Kenya border, there was no major epidemic and only one feeding center out of more than 1,000 nutrition and feeding centers had any AWD/cholera cases. The joint measures taken by the Nutrition and WASH actors were therefore successful.

The effectiveness and use of the guidance notes has never been assessed. However anecdotal evidence from the nutrition monitors indicates that partners appreciated the materials. After the 2011 outbreak they were distributed to all UNICEF nutrition partners in affected areas prior to each AWD season (AWD outbreaks in Somalia are seasonal occurrences). They were also diffused through the Nutrition Cluster in order to reach any non-UNICEF nutrition partners.

Lessons learned

Some challenges and lessons derived from the experience are

- There are several opportunities, even in stressful emergency situations, to develop joint materials. Decide where the opportunities are and try to source existing materials from other contexts which can be adapted.
- After 2011, the seasonal distribution of the guidance notes was not systematic. It had to be initiated by individuals in the Country Office. Ownership was not effectively created in field teams, in the government, or within the other affected sectors or Clusters (WASH and Health).
- A quick and simple assessment could have given an indication of the use and effectiveness of the guidance notes, while also drawing on experience to improve their use and ownership