

# Breastfeeding- Closer to mothers, a healthier start to life

50-year-old grandmother and mother of eight, Hodan Shire Dahir, cuddles her one year old grand-daughter Fatima, wiping tears from her swollen eyes. Fatima stretches her frail hand and clutches her granny's scarf, gesturing for more water to drink.

"Fatima is very weak and always sickly," Hodan says, helping her grand-daughter to some water. Their visit today to the Belet Xaawo maternal health centre is because Fatima has had diarrhoea for the past few days. Hodan had to close her small stall just next to her house, so she could tend to her ailing grand-daughter.

"Her mother is not around due to family issues with her husband (my son) so I have to be the mother, which is quite difficult as I also have to focus on running my kiosk, my only source of income."



*Hodan Shire Dahir (foreground in black) clutches her grand-daughter Fatima, as she listens in on discussions by Trócaire staff at the Maternal Health Centre in Belet Xaawo district, Gedo region, south Somalia. Trócaire/B. Mrima/August 2013*

From her previous experiences with her breast-fed children, Hodan admits that her grand-daughter's frequent bouts of infections and the seemingly slow growth rate is due to her lack of breast milk.

"Fatima's age-mates have now taken their first walking steps while she is only attempting to crawl. It's easy to tell the difference with these ones who have and are still breastfeeding. They are healthier," Hodan adds. True to her word, Fatima proves to be under-weight at a feeble 6.95 kilos (approximately 15 pounds), a third of the normal weight for one-year olds.

To foster exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months after birth, Trócaire in partnership with the local District Health Boards (DHBs) undertook a breastfeeding campaign in three districts within Gedo region; Belet Xaawo, Dollow and Luuq. Through the campaign's community mobilization meetings and awareness sessions at the various maternal health centres, Trócaire educated new mothers on the significance breastfeeding has for children's growth, immunity and their general health.

Zahra Dahiya, a member of Dollow district's health board explains why most new mothers opt for other feeding methods for their babies, other than breastfeeding.

“Most mothers would rather not breastfeed as they believe that camel milk or the customary mix of water and sugar has more nutritional value. Therefore, this campaign will enable us to work more closely with traditional birth attendants as they encourage new mothers to breastfeed within the first hour after delivery and continually until weaning.”

Trócaire's Health Program manager, Ombretta Mazzaroni, reiterates the nutritional and nurturing value of breastfeeding.

“What breast milk provides to the child cannot be compared to any other supplement such as formula milk or even the water and sugar mix that most mothers use,” Ombretta explains. “Breast-fed children have higher immunity to infections and diseases. This is so important in places like Gedo where child mortality rates are high. There is also no doubt that it enhances the bond between mother and child.”

For Hodan, “It’s a simple truth that mothers should take up seriously, if only to give their children a healthy start to life.”