



Engaging communities in meaningful dialogue through the KSrelief-funded project will help combat the high prevalence of childhood pneumonia and encourage safe caregiver practices in Somaliland. Photo credit: WHO Somalia/S.Farah

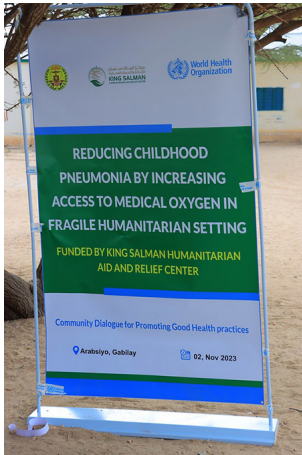
13 November 2023, Arabsiyo, Somalia – Hawa, a resilient mother of 5 young children, has experienced the challenges and joys of motherhood in Somaliland (1). Her journey took a heartbreaking turn when her new baby had a low birth weight and later died of pneumonia, a prevalent and deadly illness in Somalia.

About 12.8% of newborns in Somalia are born with low birth weight, and pneumonia is a leading cause of death for children aged under 5 years, accounting for 21% of all deaths in this age group – or 39.5 deaths per 1000 live births (2). Shockingly, only 13% of children with pneumonia symptoms receive treatment in health facilities, and less than 1% receive antibiotics either in the community or at health facilities (3). Hawa’s story, which is all too common in Somalia, highlights the urgent need to address childhood pneumonia and diseases in the country.

“Every breath counts: reducing childhood pneumonia through enhanced medical oxygen access in Somalia” is a project to combat the high prevalence of childhood pneumonia and encourage safe caregiver practices to improve child health outcomes.

The project aims to reduce under-five morbidity and mortality by 40%, by providing medical oxygen and pneumonia and diarrhoea treatments, and educating communities on safe hygiene practices, breastfeeding, and pneumonia symptoms through community dialogues. This 18-month project spans 10 districts across Somalia, including Somaliland, and is funded by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## First community dialogue makes an impression



Despite Hawa’s heartbreaking experience, she made the brave decision to take part in the first community dialogue of the KSrelief-funded project. The Ministry of Health and Development of Somaliland organized the discussion with the support of the WHO Country Office

Kangaroo mother care (KMC) was the topic of this community dialogue, which took place on 2 November 2023 in Arabsiyo, Gabilay district, Somaliland, with 27 community members. KMC is a life-saving practice that involves skin-to-skin contact between a mother and her preterm or low-birth-weight newborn.

KMC was defined and its benefits for vulnerable newborns were set out. Participants discussed potential barriers, misconceptions and cultural beliefs regarding KMC, as well as the role of fathers and the community in supporting mothers who practise KMC. In Somali culture, it is customary to carry babies on the back. But the participants agreed that KMC could become part of their culture through more community dialogue to promote the practice.

Hawa shared her thoughts on the community dialogue: “In our traditional way of carrying babies, we always believed that the mother who carries her baby on her chest and moves around with them is incompetent and putting her child in danger. However, learning today that KMC is critical for low-birth-weight children and can save their lives is very useful information.”

She added, “I couldn’t save my youngest child, but I believe that by participating in these dialogues, I can help save other children. It is essential to spread awareness about practices like KMC, and together, we can make a difference.”

Umalkayr, the facilitator for this discussion, believes that community dialogues play a crucial role in bringing about behavioural change by addressing various myths and promoting knowledge about life-saving and healthy practices among all community members, especially mothers and community elders.

“By openly discussing topics such as KMC and safe caregiver behaviours,” said Umalkayr, “local communities have shown the willingness to adapt and improve their knowledge and practices, which will eventually help save many more children.”

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**Note to editors:**

For more details about the project in Somalia, see: [“Every breath counts”: KSrelief and WHO join hands to prevent childhood deaths by increasing access to medical oxygen in Somalia](#)

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[1]. Name changed to protect identity.

[2]. [A good start in life begins in the womb.](#)  
United Nations Children’s Fund; July 2023.

[3]. [Country Cooperation Strategy for WHO and Somalia 2021–2025.](#)  
Cairo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; 2022.

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