

Facing a virus while setting up data systems to fight the virus

18 August 2020 – “You’re not a laboratory expert! Why do *you* have to go to the laboratory during these pandemic times?” Samira asked her husband, Mohamed Yare, with a hint of agitation in her voice.

Thirty-one-year-old Mohamed Yare, who serves as WHO’s National Polio Surveillance Data Manager, half-chuckled and tried to explain to his wife that he was only providing support to the Ministry of Health in Somalia in the development of a COVID-19 data collection system. This system would be integrated into the surveillance and information management system, while enhancing information management at the laboratory level. Even though the country has a functioning health management information system, and is now piloting a district health information system (DHIS-2) in some regions, they required technical support to include COVID-19 in their surveillance systems. He explained further that if this worked out, the database would help the Government to key in, track and monitor information about people infected with COVID-19.



Being deployed to support Somalia's data teams

Early one morning, in April 2020, when the polio programme team lead from WHO Somalia called Yare to request him to help develop a COVID-19 database for Somalia's Federal Ministry of Health, Yare knew he had an important task ahead of him. And yet, this job came with its own risks. As the Ministry of Health had difficulty in accessing surveillance data, it was thought that information related to all "suspected" cases could be collected from the central laboratory in Mogadishu, as samples for these "suspected" cases were sent there for COVID-19 testing, with some accompanying epidemiological information that could be used to generate a standard national line-list for COVID-19. However, working in Mogadishu's National Public Health Laboratory and training data personnel based there meant that Yare may be exposed to the risk of contracting COVID-19.

On 14 April, Yare started his new mission to help the Government set up the database for COVID-19. Before heading to work, he collected his personal protection equipment (PPE) for the week, including several masks and gloves, from his colleague and friend, Hirsi Shire Hussein, Logistics Assistant from the WHO country office in Mogadishu. Once he was fully kitted, Yare set off to support in designing the database and, eventually, help train 8 data entry teams to use it.

After reflecting on the situation carefully, Yare packed his clothes into a bag, deciding to forego the comfort of his home and family to check into a hotel nearby, while he worked at the laboratory. This decision would minimize the risk of Yare carrying home any viruses or infections to his wife and 2 young sons. After all, he knew that the COVID-19 virus was known to 'live' on clothes, phones and laptops.

On 23 April, at the start of Ramadhan, Yare's mother called him to wish him well.

"Allah will protect you, but don't forget to say your prayers," she said to her conscientious son.

Comforted with his mother's familiar voice, Yare beamed, and promised to say a longer prayer every day for his health and protection.

Fears turning into reality □



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