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
When he felt a little feverish during the second week of his new mission, Yare’s shoulders sank as he realized his fears may be turning into a reality. As soon as he felt a fever coming on, he rushed to the laboratory he was serving and asked his new friends to run a COVID-19 test on him. Within a few days, he received his results – his fear turned out to be true as he tested positive for COVID-19. In his heart, he wondered how his family would react.

Yare immediately self-isolated in the hotel where he had moved to during his mission. As soon as Samira found out about her husband’s results, she insisted she wanted to visit, but Yare convinced her to stay at home – safe and away from him while he self-isolated. He promised to update her every day about his condition, and assured her he was receiving good food at the hotel, in disposable containers, to minimize the risk of spreading the virus to anyone else.

Yare began to take paracetamol for his fever, and what he believed he should start to do – take warm water with honey and lemon every day, to give him some relief, and help boost his immunity. Within a week, Yare felt much better. He credits his family and friends for helping him to get through this time. Many of them called him every day and talked for hours to keep him company. Yare was one of the lucky ones – he didn’t have to face any social stigma because of his condition – while knowing that a new disease like COVID-19 could be a sensitive topic in many parts of the country and world.

Within 20 days, Yare went for another test, which was negative. After his test results were negative, Yare was reassured he could get back to work and meet his family again.

Databases helping assess COVID-19 information and track epidemic progression

Thanks to the support that Yare and his partners with expertise in data management at the Ministry of Health provided, Somalia’s Ministry of Health and Government were in a position to analyze information on how many people were infected or died from COVID-19. Data on COVID-19 are shared from the Banadir Hospital, De Martino Hospital and other health facilities.

To date, Mohamed Yare still provides support to the Ministry. He receives calls from teams working on the COVID-19 databases, asking for advice on how to deal with mistyped user names and forgotten passwords, for instance. Yare is one of the important links between Somalia’s Government and WHO – he shares daily updates on the COVID-19 situation between the Ministry of Health and WHO, supporting their efforts to jointly monitor and address the COVID-19 situation.

“I am so happy that I got a chance to help my country in some way during one of its critical junctures,” said Yare, with a big smile. “And the best thing for me is that my wife, mother and children are so proud of me and the work I have done, and I continue to do until now.”

Note:
WHO ensures that polio field team workers and other frontline workers are provided with PPE in their day-to-day fight in the COVID-19 response, in addition to other routine duties they conduct. WHO remains proud of and grateful to the health workers who risk their lives every day to provide health services to the people of Somalia.