Message from the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone

Mr. Sunil Saigal

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the wellbeing and livelihoods of individuals and communities and is impacting economies across the world in ways and to a degree never seen before. In Sierra Leone, we are witnessing the increase of positive COVID-19 cases, and we are seeing the negative impact, which the disease is already having on the economy of the country and on society as a whole.

The United Nations system in Sierra Leone is deeply saddened by the lives lost to COVID-19, in the country as elsewhere, and by the negative affect it is having on Sierra Leonean society. As we remain deeply engaged in supporting the national efforts to fight the virus and mitigate the detrimental impact on individuals and communities, we reaffirm United Nations solidarity with the Government and the people of Sierra Leone. We are committed to supporting the immediate response to fight the spread of the virus, and we are committed to supporting the nation in its recovery from the effects of the virus. Indeed, recovery efforts are already underway, and it will be important to sustain them and to “build back better”, so that Sierra Leone can emerge stronger from this crisis and continue on its path towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and so that no-one is left behind.

In supporting both preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Sierra Leone, the United Nations system has provided – and continues to provide – support and advisory services to the Government of Sierra Leone in, among other areas, surveillance systems, laboratory systems, case management, procurement and logistics, information and technology as well as the construction of a specialized COVID-19 treatment centre, while also providing specialized advice on measures to prevent the further spread of this outbreak and mitigate the potential social and economic impact. In providing support to the Government, the United Nations system works closely with a broad range of partners, the support of whom is invaluable.

While the Government is leading the efforts to combat the virus in Sierra Leone, and while many partners, including the United Nations, support those efforts, it is important to remember that each individual also carries a responsibility for helping to prevent the spread of the virus, by ensuring physical distancing and, enhanced hygiene, and by not disseminating false information, myths or rumors, and by preventing the stigmatization of those affected by COVID-19. As the United Nations Secretary-General has highlighted:

“Now is the time for unity, for the international community to work together in solidarity to stop this virus and its shattering consequences.”

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Governments and public health officials across Africa are racing to stop the spread of COVID-19 - Sierra Leone is no exception.

The Government of Sierra Leone responded early through the already existing Incident Management System composed of public health emergency operations centres and emergency management committees. In the initial phases of the outbreak before any cases were detected in the country, measures were put in place to track travelers through the airport and various land crossing points, and capacities related to surveillance, in-country laboratory testing and ability to successfully treat confirmed cases were conducted. Since cases were first detected in the country at the end of March 2020, multisectoral coordination of preparedness and response efforts has further been enhanced by creating a national task force, led by the President and coordinated by the Minister of Defence.

WHO-Sierra Leone is active in supporting this national-level, multi-sectoral coordination through strategic and technical assistance at all levels of response: Presidential Task Force, EOC coordination, and various technical pillars.

To support the preparedness efforts, WHO provided technical support to the Government of Sierra Leone in the development of the COVID-19 national preparedness and response plan. WHO has also been providing technical support in the development and adaptation of protocols, guidelines and standard operating procedures for surveillance (case investigation, contact tracing, quarantine, data management and points of entry), case management, infection prevention and control (IPC) and risk communication. To ensure health workers are able to identify COVID-19 cases quickly, isolate them and manage them, WHO provided technical and financial support to the surveillance pillar of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to train 170 health workers at the points of entry. WHO, through its Regional Office for Africa, supported three physicians from Sierra Leone to attend a training in Brazzaville on clinical management of COVID-19. WHO has also provided technical support to the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to assess facilities to be used either as Community Treatment Centres, Community Care Centres, or quarantine facilities.

Strengthening IPC has been a key component of preparedness and response activities. WHO supported facility-based refresher trainings at government health facilities. With support from DFID, WHO has trained 14 pharmacists in alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) production, who will produce 20,000 liters of hand rub for government healthcare facilities throughout the country. To ensure communities have access to the care they need, WHO is advocating for maintaining essential health services in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19; and is strengthening risk communication on COVID-19 at all levels to mitigate fear, rumour, and panic and to enhance adherence to COVID-19 prevention methods.

Moving into the response phase, WHO provided technical support in modelling possible outbreak scenarios and mitigation strategies.
Based on these models, together with partners, WHO is supporting the government to adequately prepare and respond to the pandemic, which is projected to last for the better part of the year or beyond.

WHO has been supporting the EOC by providing equipment and staff to the Situation Room, which provides a platform for synthesizing data from multiple sources. The Situation Room also generates a daily Situation Report and manages the flow and analysis of information using a real-time, digital dashboard. WHO supported transportation of two consignments of supplies donated by the Jack Ma Foundation to the Government of Sierra Leone: including 18,900 Viral Transport Media and Swabs, 18,912 extraction kits, 9,500 medical gloves, 3,800 PPEs, 4 ventilators and 36 thermometer guns.

With more districts becoming affected by COVID-19, decentralization of the COVID-19 response to the districts is becoming more and more important. Long-standing relationships with implementing partners, including the DFID funded UNITE consortium, the Global Fund and GAVI has allowed WHO to play a key strategic role in decentralization and partner coordination at the national and district levels. WHO serves as secretariat to the Health Development Partners Group (HDP), the HDP COVID-19 donor group, and the Universal Health Coverage (UHC) coordination group. As a member of the UN family, WHO has provided technical inputs to the UN-Sierra Leone Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 Pandemic, and is active in the Inter-Agency Emergency Preparedness Working Group.
UN Women: COVID-19 Community Mobilization and Sensitization

In a bid to contribute towards the GoSL Covid-19 Response Plan and UNCT Covid-19 Plan, UN Women has undertaken community engagement and education in the area of personal hygiene (hand-washing; wearing Face-Mask) in public as well as social distancing. UN Women purchased 50 Innovative handwashing and sanitization equipment as well as purchase and distribution of 10,000 Face-Masks to various community centers targeting public spaces in Freetown as well as in the districts (including various institutions providing Covid-19 Response services within government offices, maternity hospitals, public markets as well within the community. In Freetown, UN Women distributed 2 Handwashing Equipment and 3000 Face-Masks to the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs.

The Facemasks were distributed also to two communities in Freetown (Aberdeen Women’s Center) (which provides maternity health services as well as to victims or rape) and Mudge Farm Community. UN Women held a discussions with the community leaders on the value of obeying and adhering to the Covid-19 prevention measures including social distancing (why it is important and how to effect it); applying the measures of cleaning surfaces and wearing face-masks as well as recognizing the symptoms of Covid-19.

In addition to meeting the Covid-19 prevention measures, the face-masks met the UN Women Affirmative Procurement principle—“buy from women” because the face-masks were procured from a female owning small business. The order was for 10,000 face-masks.

This cat of affirmative procurement has motivated many women in the market not only to use but also to start making face-masks for Covid-19 responsiveness. The income to this female vendor was a most welcome encounter with UN Women—walking its talk and has generated income to this family.
IOM: Engaging Slums and Border Communities

In response to the Corona Virus Pandemic, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is supporting the Government of Sierra Leone to reinforce and reactivate health screening and Social Mobilization at prioritized high volume informal cross border points (Points of Entry) including coastal areas and wharves where people from neighboring Guinea and Liberia continue to enter Sierra Leone despite border closures.

The closure has led to increased irregular migration patterns and, this in turn, potentially increases transmission of COVID-19. Hard-to-reach border communities and coastal areas are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of limited access to information and the lack of proper healthcare infrastructures and personnel to adequately screen and quarantine suspected cases. To ensure that people have access to lifesaving information, IOM works with youths, community leaders and returning migrants to raise awareness on COVID-19 preventive measures in these areas.

Even before the first case of COVID-19 was signaled in the country on March 31, 2020, IOM worked closely with the MOHS through the Emergency Operation Center (EOC) to support the country’s preparedness and response to COVID-19. The UN Migration Agency is actively involved in both the Social Mobilization and Point of Entry pillars of the national response.

A rapid vulnerability assessment of the 16 districts of Sierra Leone was conducted in collaboration with the MOHS. At the Ministry’s request, IOM has trained, and deployed 130 community health monitors and social mobilizers who are equipped with Infection prevention Control (IPC) materials to conduct social mobilization at slums, health screening and communication activities at designated POEs including ports and ground crossing points across five of the country’s districts (Western Urban/ Western Rural/ Pujehun/ Kambia/ Port Loko) in the country. This has strengthened surveillance and risk communication at POEs and also support the work of the District Health Management Team (DHMT) in the said districts.

IOM’s risk communication for COVID-19 prevention is reaching over 200,000 people across crowded urban slums in Freetown, informal settlements, coastal communities and border areas.

In a country known for the porosity of land borders and high cross-border trade, disease surveillance and health screening are key to detect and refer potentially ill travelers to adequate healthcare structures and limit the spread of a disease. Engaging with communities in high risk border areas, crowded urban slums and informal settlements also plays a great role in further preventing the spread of a disease.

Our health approach is guided by IOM’s Health Border Mobility Management Framework that informs interventions for reducing the spread of infectious disease across borders.

Dr James Bagonza, Officer in charge at IOM Sierra Leone.
Community engagement and health screening at border areas are some of the main lessons during the Ebola outbreak. Today, these lessons are also helping IOM to complement Government’s effort in the fight against COVID-19 in the country.

“We are now revamping our infection prevention training, social mobilization and health screening in local communities especially in border areas with our network of volunteers to ensure that everyone, regardless of social classes, is informed and empowered to protect themselves and their loved ones against the disease.”

Dr. Bagonza, Officer in charge at IOM Sierra Leone.

IOM priority is to reinforce and reactivate health screening at high volume informal crossing points in coastal areas as well as wharves in border areas with high economic activity were people from neighboring Guinea and Liberia continue to enter Sierra Leone.

From the 5th April to 5th May 2020, volunteers including community mobilizers, youths, migrants and POE health workers trained by IOM and the Ministry of Health were able to conduct household visits and screening of more than 5,000 travelers at crossing points.

IOM is also implementing a digital and on-air strategy with returnees, ECOWAS Youth council and some University students to raise awareness on COVID-19. Three talented young returned migrants who are volunteers with IOM’s Migrants as Messenger Project, a peer-to-peer messaging campaign used their creative skills to write and record a song about Corona in order to encourage local communities to adopt and adhere to preventive measures. The song has been distributed to some local radio stations and on social media.

IOM’s response to COVID-19 in Sierra Leone is supported by the Governments of Japan, Netherlands and the United States.
UNDP: Supporting Mano River Union and Office of National Security

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) procured and donated COVID-19 infection prevention and control hygiene supplies and information to representatives of the Mano River Union (MRU) and the Office of National Security (ONS). The items which included 37 locally produced hand washing stations, 8,500 posters and flyers and 22 banners with COVID-19 mitigation information and risk communication, 350 reusable face masks, 48 cartons of liquid and bar soaps among other materials will be sent to support border communities in Kambia, Pujehun, Port Loko and Kono districts. The communities will also be equipped with emergency response materials that are currently being procured.

Sierra Leone is bordered by Guinea to the Northwest and Liberia to the Southwest. The three countries share a lot in common in terms of social, economic and political aspects. Ebola in Sierra Leone was believed to have broken out in Kailahun district at the border entry point with Guinea from where the case reported to have come.

Recognizing the shared threat of the COVID-19 pandemic to the health and economic security of the people of the Mano River Union States and the urgent need to address these concerns by all parties, UNDP Sierra Leone is supporting the training of Joint Boarder Security Committees established across communities located in border chiefdoms of Sierra Leone sharing borders with Guinea and Liberia.

UNDP is also supporting trainings for border authorities designed around subjects of state and border security, and COVID-19 response, Infectious disease identification, reporting, prevention and control measures, as well as risk communication and community engagement.

UNDP’s support to the joint border COVID-19 intervention aims to enhance the skills and capabilities of border and local community authorities to better address COVID-19 and its challenges. The intervention builds on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the MRU four UNDP Country Offices in November 2019 for improved collaboration among member states and UNDP within the sub-region and to respond to situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This partnership is central both to the MRU and to the Government of Sierra Leone particularly across the border communities and will provide a new-face in responding to COVID-19 and to other security issues that pose threat to the MRU states, considering Sierra Leone’s close ties with Guinea and Liberia”

UNDP Rule of Law Expert and Programme Manager, Walter Neba.
The importance of the Union to the three countries - Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea was evident during and after the Ebola outbreak where authorities and communities across the borders joined hands to respond to combating Ebola and its after-effects. The joint interventions are also fulfilling UNDP’s commitment to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by building strong Governance institutions even at the local level and equally strong partnerships for development.

This maiden COVID-19 border intervention will empower community-based security structures for better case surveillance and contact tracing. These borders are very remote and hard-to-reach making technological innovations widely used elsewhere in the world for managing COVID-19 only a thought yet they are ‘hot-spots’ for the spread of the virus. With little or no information reaching them, the communities are highly at-risk. That is why UNDP is supporting training of border security for COVID-19, helping financially towards physical deployments and face-to-face community engagement activities in these areas.

This partnership is also critical for promoting inclusive participation and the Leave-no-one-behind principle in the fight against the Corona Virus while fostering national and regional security.

The COVID-19 intervention is part of the fulfillment of the commitments embedded in UNDP’s Country Programme Document (CPD) for Sierra Leone covering 2020 to 2030 which emphasizes focus on building resilience of vulnerable (border) communities to shocks. The initial support provided totals to $75,000 is funded from its core resources and the Global Rule of Law fund.

The joint border response activities are also UNDP’s commitment to providing further support to the Governments and people of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea through the MRU partnership to ensure sub-regional rather than a country-specific approach to not only breaking COVID-19 but to ensuring better preparedness for future shocks and build a shared and holistic recovery post-COVID-19.
The Government of Sierra Leone, UNICEF and partners have undertaken the biggest ever distribution of insecticide treated mosquito nets across the country during a campaign scheduled for the end of May 2020. About 4.6 million nets were distributed to pregnant women and children under five, the two groups most at risk of malaria, a disease which is the biggest killer among this targeted group in Sierra Leone.

The reality and burden of malaria becomes very apparent at the children’s wards of hospitals across the country, where the nurses and doctors fight hard daily to save the lives of children who have malaria. Each death is a tragedy, which is felt strongest when one sees the mourning family members trying to cope with the loss.

UNICEF Deputy Representative, Rushnan Murtaza.

Over the past two decades, the National Malaria Control Programme of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in collaboration with partners has worked to dramatically prevent and control the disease. From 2010 to 2018, the number of deaths has more than halved and the number of malaria cases dropped by 20%, indicating that with the right interventions and multisectoral commitments further progress is possible.

Despite this progress, the incidence of malaria in Sierra Leone is still worrying. According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017, malaria is responsible for 47% of the outpatient visits by children under five years and account for 38% of outpatient visits for all ages to health facilities.

This malaria campaign, which was carried out with the financial support from Global Fund and PMI/USAID, reached 95% of households with up to 3 bed nets each and to also empower communities with correct information on the use of the nets. The period will also be used to increase awareness and improve accurate knowledge on COVID19 prevention and containment.

Sadly, deaths due to malaria might continue to rise during the current times of COVID-19, when there are some disruptions to regular anti-malaria programmes, preventing the rate of infection is therefore one of the main principles interventions in the country’s malaria programme.

UNICEF Deputy Representative, Rushnan Murtaza.
UNICEF also procured and distributed 1,458 veronica buckets, which were received by District Health Management Teams ahead of the campaign to help to ensure that good hygiene practices such as handwashing with soap was maintained at all distribution sites.

Additional to that, a total 1,784 COVID-19 social mobilisers, who include (Community Health Workers and volunteers), have been selected and will be trained to participate in the integrated house to house sensitization activities.

Further to the procurement and distribution of mosquito bed nets and amidst COVID-19 flight suspension and border closure, UNICEF has also ensured uninterrupted supply of essential life-saving antimalarial medicines, which have been produced and shipped through the UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen, in Denmark.

"COVID-19 has disrupted many aspects of children’s lives, including their education and their right to play, This initiative reaffirms UNICEF’s commitment to collaborate with different stakeholders towards the common goal of overcoming this disease and allow all children and their families to return to their daily lives.

UNICEF Representative, Dr. Suleiman Braimoh.

UNFPA: Sustaining Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

UNFPA is the lead UN agency supporting the National Psychosocial Pillar, chaired by the Ministry of Social Welfare. A psychological first aid training manual is being developed for response workers in order to guide the provision of supportive response to those affected by COVID-19.

In April 2020, UNFPA supported the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs to establish a GBV “116” hotline to provide counselling and referral services to survivors of gender-based violence. UNFPA also ensures the availability of free counselling and clinical services to GBV survivors through our NGO partner Rainbo Initiative at two centres.

UNFPA is also supporting the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs to set up two government sites. UNFPA is supporting the government to implement strategic interventions to keep health systems functioning. The focus is on maintaining the provision of SRH information and services, to protect health workers from contracting the infection, and to limit the spread of COVID-19 in communities.

The following activities are being implemented
To better understand the effects of the pandemic on the current status of sexual reproductive health services, UNFPA is conducting a rapid assessment with a focus on Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care and Family Planning Services. A rapid assessment tool has been developed and piloted. Assessments will be conducted in seven Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care (CEmONC) sites as well as 10 BEmONC sites.
**COVID-19 Isolation and Treatment Centers**

UNFPA is supporting the establishment of isolation centres in the country’s five CEmONC facilities to be operated by health professionals trained in infection prevention and control. UNFPA is coordinating the establishment of a separate isolation facility for UN staff and dependents.

In collaboration with the UN Country Team, UNFPA is also coordinating the establishment of a specialized COVID-19 treatment centre to support the national response.

1. **Sustaining the supply of modern contraceptives and other lifesaving reproductive health commodities up to the last mile.**

Contraceptives and lifesaving maternal health medicines have been pre-positioned to cover all 16 districts and 24 hospitals in the country to ensure a minimum of six months’ supply is available. The priority is to prevent stock outs that may arise as a result of restricted inter-district movements and deviation of resources to the pandemic response. Valued at $361,661.46, the contraceptives and lifesaving maternal health medicines will protect an estimated 120,000 couples from unintended pregnancies for a year period.

2. **Increasing demand for sexual and reproductive health and gender based violence services among women and girls.**

Key messaging on priority areas: At least 600,000 people are being targeted through a new public-private partnership between UNFPA, in collaboration with the government, UN partners and the mobile phone provider Africell SL. SMS messages are targeted at subscribers with data and voice messages are targeted at low literacy subscribers. These messages are on GBV, family planning, maternal health and coronavirus.

The mass media campaign includes a social media component, through WhatsApp, facebook and Twitter, aiming to reach more technologically-literate women and girls. Radio jingles with similar messages have been produced and are aired daily on four radio stations. The ultimate aim of the campaign is to prevent GBV and to increase demand for family planning, maternal health and GBV services.

National life skills radio programme: UNFPA continues to support the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education to air life skills sessions on the Radio Teaching Programme, based on the national life skills manual “I am somebody”. The programme is aired five days per week and aims to reach both in and out of school adolescents.
Talking to children about COVID-19

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by everything you’re hearing about the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Your children could also be feeling anxious.

Children might also find it difficult to understand what they hear from other people or from the media.

Having an open, supportive discussion with your children can help them understand, cope and even make a positive contribution to help stop the spread of the coronavirus (COVID – 19) in Sierra Leone.

Every child must know why people are talking about Corona Virus (COVID-19). This is what you can tell them about the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

- Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a group of viruses that can make people feel sick. Viruses are very tiny organisms that you cannot see with your eyes. They can easily travel between people and can make people feel sick.

- The new coronavirus spreads through contact with an infected person in proximity from coughing, sneezing or other body fluids, even if those people are not exhibiting symptoms, or through touching contaminated surfaces.

- Since December 2019, COVID-19 has spread worldwide infecting people regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion or age.

- Currently, there is no vaccine (marklate) for the new coronavirus, but many of the symptoms can be treated. Most people recover from coronavirus and getting early treatment can help protect your health and your chances of survival.

**Talk to your child about the basic signs and symptoms of COVID-19**: Most Common symptoms of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) include Fever, Cough, Sore throat, running nose, difficulty breathing and body weakness.

**Talk to your children about how coronavirus disease (COVID-19) can spread**: A person who is infected with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) can pass the virus to another person when they sneeze or cough. Advice children to stay away from people who are coughing of sneezing so that the droplets do not reach them. Also remind children to also cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing.

**Talk to your children and demonstrate about why it is important to regularly wash their hands** with soap and water for at least 20 secs. They can also use a hand sanitiser to clean the hands. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) can spread if a person touches a surface that is contaminated with the virus and when they touch their eyes, nose and/or mouth, the virus is transmitted into their body. Handwashing will help to remove the virus from the hands.

**Remember** - Children have a right to information that comes only from trusted sources such as from the Government of Sierra Leone, from UNICEF and from WHO Websites.
To mark its 75th anniversary in 2020, the United Nations is igniting a people’s debate. Launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, it promises to be the largest and furthest reaching global conversation ever on building the future we want.

In a world of dramatic changes and complex challenges, from the climate crisis to population shifts to the unknown course of technology, we need collective action more than ever before.

**Through UN75, the United Nations will encourage people to put their heads together to define how enhanced international cooperation can help realize a better world by 2045, the UN’s 100th birthday.**

UN75 continues to implement and scale up activities to create the “world’s biggest conversation” on the future we want, whilst being responsive to the rapidly changing situation in different parts of the world due to COVID-19. The overarching aim of UN75 is to reinvigorate support for global cooperation; this pandemic is a reminder of how important it is that we work together - across borders, sectors and generations - to overcome the challenges we face.

Anyone can join the conversation, all you need is 60 seconds: https://sl.one.un.org/2020/04/21/un75-consultation-have-your-say/

For more information on consultations please visit our website: https://un75.online/

Access our COVID-19 information corner:

Find our COVID-19 situation reports here:

Access global COVID-19 information and advice from WHO at this link: