Responding to COVID-19 in Sierra Leone

“FOR EVERY CHILD IN SIERRA LEONE, GOOD HEALTH”
15 TO 30 APRIL 2020

“Delivering results for children during the COVID-19 pandemic”
“As we continue our work to overcome this pandemic, UNICEF remains on board, working to support the Government of Sierra Leone to address the health, social and economic risks of the pandemic on the lives of children. The support from our various development partners is making this critical work possible”

Dr. Suleiman Braimoh, UNICEF

“Don’t let children be the hidden victims of COVID-19 pandemic”
“The world is currently united in a shared struggle against an invisible enemy. But while our eyes are firmly focused on how to avoid or treat COVID-19, the serious consequences that will challenge us far beyond the current pandemic – the hidden impacts – are not yet front of mind. This must change. “ Click here to Read the full statement by UNICEF Executive Director, Henrietta Fore

Video message from young people
Young people in Sierra Leone are concerned about the Corona virus pandemic. They know they are vulnerable in a lot of ways and they want to play a part to share information which will help stop the spread of the disease.
Click here to Watch this important video message
The demand for oxygen therapy for COVID-19 patients exerts strain on the health resources available in Sierra Leone. Given this apparent need for increased oxygen supplies, UNICEF has contracted a Biomedical Engineer to explore the different options that Sierra Leone could adopt to increase in-country capacity to provide oxygen to patients with COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses.

With funding from the UK-AID’s Saving Lives Programme, repair and maintenance of critical supplies and equipment have started in all the districts of the country. This has included the refurbishment and setting up of an oxygen plant at 34 Military Hospital (a designated treatment centre for COVID-19) which was refurbished with the unused oxygen plant components collected from another district. Work on setting up this plant is now complete. 26 local technicians and nurses been trained on the proper use of equipment to avoid the unnecessary breakdown of machines due to misuse. At Connaught Hospital, support is being given to identify and supply alternative sources of oxygen, such as oxygen cylinders.

UNICEF has received funding from the World Bank to commence procurement of essential medical and personal protective equipment as well as Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) supplies on behalf of the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). This support to the GoSL will address a chronic gap in gloves in health facilities across the country.

Across all the regions in Sierra Leone, UNICEF is supporting the Special Baby Care Units (SBCUs) to provide level II care for sick newborns. At one of the sites, Ola During, the detection of multiple COVID-19 cases among health workers and the resultant quarantine of nearly all health workers there, UNICEF supported its SBCU to continue providing services for already admitted sick newborns through deploying a paediatrician from Kenema SBCU. UNICEF further assisted the MoHS with a rapid needs assessment to establish a new SBCU in King Harman Hospital as an additional site to provide an option to sick newborns in Freetown.

As COVID-19 is expected to impact negatively on household food security and nutritional status of the population, UNICEF is assisting the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) in recalculating the burden of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) to allow safeguarding of the required supplies.

A nationwide bednet distribution campaign is scheduled for May and UNICEF has assisted the MoHS with incorporating short orientation/training of primary health care workers and Community Health Workers (CHWs) on COVID-19 preventive measures. The joint planning training session was undertaken while ensuring the strict adherence to preventive measures (social distancing, hand washing, and use of cloth masks) as per MoHS guidelines.
UNICEF support to the WASH sector has prioritised the supply of water and sanitation hygiene services in Health Care Facilities (HCF), designated COVID-19 treatment centers, Primary Health Units and quarantine/isolation centres. Water supply in Jui hospital, one of the designated treatment center for COVID-19 patients, is being upgraded through flushing and cleaning of two boreholes.

This support was preceded by a rapid assessment of WASH needs in 11 Hospitals (10 District hospitals and Jui Hospital in Western Area Rural District) which are proposed as treatment centres for COVID-19 patients. Most hospitals have inadequate supply of water, and sanitation and hygiene and UNICEF, in coordination with the District Health authorities, has agreed to address the identified needs.

Through the Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), UNICEF Sierra Leone is working with GUMA Valley Water Company on the rehabilitation of 86 community water supply facilities in underserved locations across the Freetown municipality to provide water for poor families. The work will include the repair of public water points, primarily High Density Polyethelene (HDPE) water tanks (each 10,000 liters) in Freetown.

WASH items (buckets, soap, chlorine tablets, etc.) have been prepositioned—to address the need of 5,000 families. A total of 1,458 Veronica buckets (20 litres) with lid and faucets were released for hand washing stations set up for the Long-Lasting Insecticide Treated Nets (LLIN) campaign.

UNICEF is working as a part of the Continuous Learning Pillar of the Education Emergency Taskforce and collaborating with the Teaching Service Commission to develop content and programming for this all-important radio-based distance teaching which is delivered by qualified teachers. The teachers deliver structured lessons from a studio which UNICEF constructed and officially opened in 2018 at the Ministry’s Radio Broadcast House in Freetown.

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), with support from Education Development partners including UNICEF, is currently using the radio learning platform to target approximately 2.5 million students from around the country with daily educational lessons.

UNICEF continues to work with the MBSSE and the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) to develop distance and digital teacher training programmes and to also assess the reach and listenership of the radio programming using Edutrac, a free and open source system for which supports management of educational institutions.
In collaboration with the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs (MoGCA), UNFPA and UN Women, UNICEF has developed key messages on gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of COVID-19. These messages are being used in radio discussion programmes across 40 community radios to prevent violence against women and girls from escalating in the home setting during lockdown periods. UNICEF in collaboration with UN partners have contributed to the finalisation of a set of guidelines on gender mainstreaming, to strengthen gender-sensitive approaches, within the national COVID-19 mitigation and response plans.

UNICEF has supported the MoGCA in establishing a toll-free hotline for callers to report on GBV cases. The 116 helpline, which is a 24-hour call center established to provide confidential guidance and referrals for survivors of GBV, was launched on 14 April.

UNICEF is supporting the Psychosocial Support (PSS) Pillar with Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) and MoGCA to combine existing psychosocial and case management activities for vulnerable children and families, including referrals to protection and social welfare services.

UNICEF in its support to strengthen the Social Protection system in reaching vulnerable households is actively participating in the Quick Action Economic Response Plan (QAERP) Social Protection Pillar and supported the training for targeting and enrolment of beneficiaries of the national Social Safety Net with COVID awareness sessions. In addition to the national Social Safety Net (SSN) programme, an emergency cash transfer programme targeting households of informal workers in urban areas will be rolled out, funded by the World Bank and the EU, with targeting and enrolment of beneficiaries for both programmes set to start in May.

UNICEF is engaging in efforts to connect the SSN Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) to U-Report for enhanced communication and social accountability. As a first step, the newly recruited community monitors under the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) will be connected to the system, and cash transfer beneficiaries will be connected as soon as targeting is completed.
As co-lead of the Social Mobilization Pillar and standing member of the One Health Communication and Social Mobilization Team, UNICEF has supported the development of a costed communication preparedness and response plan adapted from the National Risk Communication Strategy.

UNICEF’s social media pages (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) are reaching audiences with accurate preventive information as well as update them on the response. COVID-19 related messages have reached about 39,200 people through organic posts - Facebook (16,283), Twitter (19,636) and Instagram (3,500). A web story which was developed to share the experience of using education radio during the period of COVID-19, has been published on the UNICEF West and Central Regional Office Website and on the UNICEF Africa social media pages.

Local newspapers have also been used to publish and amplify global messages and statements on the impact of COVID-19 on children and this has resulted in more than seven (7) articles referencing UNICEF in their reports related to COVID-19 during the month of April. A fact sheet/explainer was developed on how to talk to children about COVID-19. This was also published in two local newspapers.

Three local artists, Sir Wahid, Maggie and Leonus Di Genius, have supported the dissemination of messages through song and a jingle. Both the song and the jingle are receiving airplay on national and community radio stations. An animated video bringing the voices of youths and targeting children, was developed and is being broadcast on two national TV Stations. This video has also been uploaded to the YouTube channel to promote wider audience reach.

In partnership with a local NGOs, UNICEF is working through forty (40) community radios to regularly develop up-to-date informative programmes related to COVID-19. The information shared relates to building knowledge about the signs and symptoms of the disease and discusses some of the secondary impacts of COVID-19, including violence against children. These programmes are uploaded on the Facebook page of the NGO and feedback on the impact and quality of the programmes is sourced through 30 established listeners’ groups, comprising 180 listeners.

Over 2,000 imams and pastors, members of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone maintained their engagement in communities to ensure proper observance of prevention measures, especially in the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

Through partnership with a local NGOs, coordinators from 146 chiefdoms integrated COVID-19 into their orientation package and mobilized community influencers, groups and platforms, including influencing integration of COVID-19 response in community action plans of the 1,115 Village Development Communities.

The SMS based U-Report platform continues to engage and provide supportive COVID-19 information, and since January 2020, UNICEF has sent out bi-weekly polls to the 158,000 registered U-Reporters, based in all 16 districts of the country. Each poll is accompanied by key facts which help build the respondent’s knowledge about COVID-19 and addresses myths and rumors. The COVID-19 rumor tracking function avails responses to questions raised and debunks rumors shared by respondents, through the platform.

UNICEF has worked in partnership with Directorate for Science and Technology (DSTI) and Ministry of Health and Sanitation, on the production of an Electronic Pass (E-Pass) System to manage travel passes during the lockdown and curfew travel. A drone-based mobility applet has been developed and tested to assess how people move before, during, and after Government regulated lock down periods. The Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) will use this data to inform how best to structure any future restrictions.
UNICEF attends overall national coordination for preparedness planning and response through the Public Health National Emergency Operations Centre (PHNEOC), with specific inputs to the Communication and Social Mobilization (co-chair), Logistics, Case Management, Food Assistance and Nutrition (FAN), Psychosocial Support (PSS) and Surveillance and Case Management pillars.

**Health, Nutrition and HIV**
UNICEF is the Co-Chair of the Nutrition Cluster in the COVID-19 response. The Nutrition Cluster provides leadership and systematic coordination for timely response to nutritional emergencies in the country through operational planning, preparedness, response and monitoring mechanism. The Nutrition Cluster is one of the three clusters of the FAN Pillar, of which UNICEF is an active member. Together with WHO and UNFPA, UNICEF advocated with Ministry of Health and Sanitation for much needed attention to ensure continuation of essential health and nutrition service delivery, which led to the creation of ‘Non-COVID service’ subgroup as part of Case Management pillar within EOC.

**Water and Sanitation Hygiene (WASH)**
UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation have initiated the process of revitalising the WASH Pillar. In collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, UNICEF has commenced the identification and enlistment of all Emergency WASH partners in country to participate in a first coordination meeting planned in the first week of May. Given the prevailing context, the first meeting will be held through virtual means. Furthermore, UNICEF is actively engaging and supporting the Case Management and Surveillance Pillar in response to WASH services in health facilities.

**Risk Communication and Community Engagement**
As co-lead of the Social Mobilization Pillar and standing member of the One Health Communication and Social Mobilization Team, UNICEF has provided assistance to the development of a costed communication preparedness and response plan adapted from the National Risk Communication Strategy.

**Education**
As co-Lead for the Communications Pillar under the National Education Emergency Taskforce, UNICEF is providing technical assistance for the development of a National Education Communication plan. The focus is on awareness raising, messaging and social mobilisation; developing and supporting content for IEC messaging on COVID; and messaging on community socialisation in local languages via community leaders.

**Child Protection**
As part of the Psychosocial Support (PSS) Pillar led by Ministry of Social Welfare, UNICEF has supported the finalisation of the government’s PSS framework for the COVID-19 response, including the PSS strategies, activity plan and timeframe, and partner mapping. Additionally, the existing Psychological First Aid (PFA) manual was revised to make it context-specific for COVID-19. The manual will be used to conduct trainings for frontline personnel such as government social workers, health workers and CSO staff, who will then deliver Psychosocial Services, both in quarantine and otherwise, including children and other at-risk populations.

**Social Protection**
UNICEF is actively participating in the Quick Action Economic Recovery Plan (QAERP) Social Protection Pillar, providing technical input and advocating for child sensitive social protection responses.
Health, Nutrition and HIV
UNICEF is working to ensure continuity of Primary Health Care (PHC) and essential nutrition services. This is being done through safeguarding supply and logistics chains to ensure uninterrupted supply of essential life-saving commodities especially in the context of international flight suspension and border closure. Community outreach and mobilization by Community Health Workers (CHW) is being intensified to support the sustained coverage of essential PHC services for children and mothers. This cadre of health volunteers has been effective during the nationwide mass distribution of long lasting insecticidal treated nets (LLINs), whereby they played a role in doing door to door awareness raising on COVID-19 during the household registration.

In support of the health workforce, a paediatrician was deployed in the Special Baby Care Unit in Ola During Children’s Hospital, to provide services for already admitted sick newborns following the detection of multiple COVID-19 cases among health workers and the resultant quarantine of nearly all health workers.

Civil Society Organisations have been engaged for awareness raising on COVID-19 among caregivers of children living with HIV (CLHIV) and to support timely administration of Antiretrovirals for people living with HIV.

Water and Sanitation Hygiene, (WASH)
UNICEF’s support is well aligned in ensuring the continuity of programming between development and humanitarian situation in the WASH sector. This work includes the current refurbishment (flushing and cleaning) of two boreholes in Jui Hospital and other WASH related planned activities to address the issue of inadequate water supply at the facility including designated COVID-19 treatment center.

Child Protection
UNICEF is working with the Government through the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare to introduce a Protection Pillar and to strengthen gender-sensitive approaches within the national plans. This will facilitate the work of UNICEF in the reduction of child marriage and teen pregnancy including addressing violence against children. UNICEF is working closely with the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy to address adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and Gender Based Violence, through informed advocacy, social mobilisation and behavior change communication strategies. Following the COVID-19 outbreak the work has been accelerated with the understanding of increasing vulnerability to women and girls due to insecurity and tensions in the household as a result of the crisis. Working within the UN system and with development partners with a focus on vulnerability of adolescent girls is in addition responding to teen pregnancy and child marriage and the same is integrated into the education and health system response.

For children in the juvenile justice system, including in pre-trial custody, remand homes and approved schools, and those living with parents in detention, the risk of contracting the virus is high. UNICEF is placing effort in advocating for an immediate moratorium on considerations for their release and reintegration into safe environments, in addition to new admissions of children in detention facilities.

Education
To ensure continuity of learning, UNICEF and key education partners are supporting radio programming to provide lessons for the estimated 2.6 million children who are out of school. The radio lessons will help to bridge any gap in learning to facilitate the return to school when schools reopen.

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