As of 31 August 2020, a total of 220,331 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 3,580 associated deaths, were reported in West and Central Africa Region (WCAR).

21 out of the 24 countries in the region are reporting community transmissions, while three are reporting clusters of cases.

6.7 million people have been reached with critical WASH services.

34 million children were supported with distance/home-based learning opportunities.

The number of COVID-19 cases in West and Central Africa (WCAR) continue to rise, though on average the increase has slowed compared to the earlier phase of the pandemic. WCAR accounts for 21 per cent of confirmed cases and 16 per cent of deaths in Africa Region. The five countries in WCAR reporting the highest number of confirmed cases are Nigeria (53,865), Ghana (44,205), Cameroon (19,142), Côte d’Ivoire (17,948) and Senegal (13,611) representing 68 per cent of all confirmed cases. In WCAR, West Africa accounts for 76 per cent of all confirmed cases.

The number of deaths associated to COVID-19 is increasing in many countries including those previously reporting low death rates. As of 31 August 2020, 17 countries are reporting a case fatality rate (CFR) that is higher than the average WCAR CFR of 1.62 per cent. Chad (7.61 per cent), Liberia (6.29 per cent), Niger (5.87 per cent), Mali (4.54 per cent) and Burkina Faso (4.01 per cent) are the top five countries reporting the highest CFRs in WCAR.

The pandemic in WCAR exhibits an upward trend but the increase is relatively slower compared to the earlier months. However, the region also faces continued challenges on limited testing capacities and the delay in releasing data from some countries, which may have affected the reported increases in confirmed cases. The situation also varies country-to-country,
with Gambia having experienced a 1935 per cent increase in confirmed cases and 1700 per cent increase in deaths associated to COVID-19 within one month.

Due to the combined effects of food insecurity and COVID-19, as well as the locust threat, the number of people in need of emergency food assistance could climb to 57.6 million people in the Sahel and West Africa countries from July to August 2020 (Source: WFP). On 17 July, UNICEF and WFP joined forces to issue an alert on the unprecedented impact of food insecurity and COVID-19 on child malnutrition, warning of more than 15 million expected cases of acute malnutrition in 2020.

**Coordination and Partnerships**

In West and Central Africa, UNICEF continues to support governments in the development, fine tuning and implementation of their COVID-19 response plans. UNICEF’s Regional Office and all UNICEF Country Offices have developed and are implementing dedicated response strategies that contribute to outbreak control as well as to mitigate secondary impacts of the pandemic. These include support to Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE), provision of critical WASH-Infection Prevention Control (IPC) materials and the continuity of essential health and social services for children, adolescents, women and vulnerable populations. UNICEF is leading the coordination of regional partners’ support on RCCE pillar, and co-leading on Operational Coordination, case management, WASH/IPC, and logistics and operational support.

**UNICEF’s COVID-19 response**

**Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)**

The UNICEF-led WCAR RCCE Working Group is organizing media webinars with journalists from the region to address an increase of rumors regarding the use of masks, COVID-19 treatment-related issues, persistent fear of going to health units, and the lack of understanding of frequent changes in public health and social measures. The sixth round of feedback from communities for the regional trend analysis also revealed a persistent stigmatization of infected people and health workers. As a result, UNICEF WCARO, jointly with WHO, IOM and MSF conducted a training on community engagement for the Niger RCCE Working Group members, focusing on specific tools and interventions to build trust and fight stigmatization and rumors. Similar trainings with other national working groups will follow in the coming weeks.

The WCAR RCCE Working Group has also developed a training and IEC materials package to reinforce the humanization of the response and health staff’s role as agents of change and how to address rumors and stigmatization to the Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and Case Management Regional Working Group. The training material has been sent to country counterparts to be replicated in the coming weeks.

In Chad, specific training on COVID-19 prevention measures and community engagement for refugee communities was organized in two camps, targeting traditional and religious leaders, youth associations, community relays and health workers, engaging a total of 6,062 men and 1,596 women.

**Medical and WASH supplies, Infection Prevention and Control (IPC)**

In line with UNICEF’s global WASH response framework, the Regional Office is supporting the country offices in four main areas:

1. Support to Government-led WASH/IPC coordination, including through WASH clusters
2. Hygiene programming with a focus on handwashing
3. IPC in health care facilities, schools, communities and households
4. Analysis of the gains and impact of WASH response to ensure long lasting changes

An estimated 6.7 million people have been reached with critical WASH services out of 12.2 million people targeted (55 per cent progress), including an estimated 4.1 million people who are living in conflict/humanitarian settings. A total of 153,437 healthcare facilities staff and community health workers were trained in infection prevention and control procedures (38 per cent progress). The regional WASH/IPC response is now 40 per cent funded, with USD 41 million out of the required USD 104 million received.

WCARO, with the active participation of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Madagascar country offices has organized
two webinars (English and French) on key safety considerations that should inform the decision-making process about reopening schools and how to best support national preparation and implementation processes. The webinar focused particularly on ensuring safety operations for school re-openings and provides orientations drawing from the various global guidance and experiences from other countries and regions where schools have re-opened.

With over one million internally displaced people in Burkina Faso, the COVID-19 pandemic adds another burden on vulnerable populations affected by conflicts. A recent study, supported by UNICEF, showed that 93 per cent of IDPs in Kaya do not feel they have enough access to WASH services to implement the safe hygiene practices to protect from COVID-19 (compared to 67 per cent of respondents in non-displaced population). UNICEF has increased WASH humanitarian service delivery, reaching 70,000 people with access to water and sanitation services.

Supply

To date, UNICEF’s West and Central Africa Regional Office has procured USD 72 million of COVID-19 supplies, 45 per cent of which have already been delivered to country offices. Shipments have increased over July and August.

Provision of Healthcare Services

With regard to immunization, despite the COVID pandemic, 15 countries in the region have achieved 80% coverage for Penta3 vaccine and 10 countries have reached 80 per cent coverage for measles vaccine. This still represents a drop compared to the same period in 2019, and results in more than 500,000 children under one having missed their vaccination with measles and Penta3 vaccines.

Most countries have adequate vaccine stocks, with the exception for stock outs for oral polio vaccine in Guinea, tuberculosis vaccine in Equatorial Guinea and yellow fever vaccine in Liberia. The majority of countries due to conduct a polio campaign have already received their vaccine orders.

Nutrition

UNICEF continues to actively facilitate and support the regional coordination platforms, by leading the Regional Nutrition Working Group and its Nutrition-In-Emergency sub-group and co-leading the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG). As co-lead of the Regional FSNWG working group, UNICEF is currently working on a second advocacy note covering the medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the nutritional situation in the region. This document is planned to be issued in September and will target institutional as well as technical partners.

The addendum covering Seasonal Malaria Prophylaxis Campaign (SMC) coupled with massive acute malnutrition screening activities targeting children under five was finalized with WHO approval at the end of July and shared with UNICEF Country Offices, as well as with technical partners through regional coordination mechanism.

UNICEF has facilitated large-scale communication activities on breastfeeding during COVID-19 throughout the World Breastfeeding Week. As part of this regional action, an Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) social media pack has been released and a regional learning and sharing café was organized in collaboration with the global nutrition initiative, Alive & Thrive (A&T) and WHO.

In the region, three countries - Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania - are at advanced planning stages to conduct national nutrition surveys using the SMART method which will allow them to have an accurate overview of the nutritional situation for 2021. Mali was among this group, but the recent political events have thrown those plans in doubt. Chad and Cameroon are in the early stages of planning. In addition, a Rapid Nutrition SMART was carried out in July 2020 in the six communes that host large number of IDPs in Northern Burkina Faso, Barsalogho, Djibo, Arbinda, Kaya, Matiacoli, Titao. This will allow partners to better capture trends in the nutritional situation among 6-59-month-old children.

Education

Since the beginning of the pandemic, UNICEF has helped to support about 34 million children out of 42 million affected children with distance/home-based learning opportunities. An estimated 15,000 out of 140,000 schools are implementing the Safe Schools Protocol. A total of 20 UNICEF country offices are actively working to support governments in the development of plans for the re-opening of schools. The first phase of the plans was prepared for the partial re-opening of schools in June to allow children to prepare and take their exams.

In Côte d'Ivoire, two studies have been conducted to inform the development of the reopening of schools plan: “Qualitative analysis of CORONAVIRUS disease (COVID19) in Côte d'Ivoire: What are the
consequences for vulnerable households and basic social Services?” and “Evaluation of distance learning and the reopening of the school in the context of the COVID health crisis-19”.

Out of the 20 countries that received funding from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), UNICEF was designated as grant agent in 11 and received over USD 74 million or 47 per cent of the total GPE allocation.

Education Can’t Wait (ECW) re-started discussion with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso for the preparation of the Multi-Year-Resilience Program with the intent to approve the funds in the last quarter of 2020.

Child Protection

As of late August 2020, nearly 25,000 children without parental care have been provided with alternative care, reaching nearly a third of the annual target for the region. This includes children living on the street and children sent away for Koranic education. In addition, nearly one million children, parents and caregivers have been reached with direct mental health and psychosocial support, and 3.5 million children and adults have access to a safe and accessible channel for reporting sexual exploitation and abuse, reaching 80 per cent of the target.

UNICEF continues to support the COVID-19 response across West and Central Africa through monitoring of the implementation of operational guidance and support, webinars to share country experiences across countries, and on the measurement and assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on violence against children, gender-based violence, child marriage and birth registration in conflict and non-conflict settings.

Social Protection

UNICEF worked with country teams in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to develop a joint proposal with WFP to support the social protection response to COVID-19. Through government-led programmes, UNICEF will help to reach an additional 130,000 households with cash transfers and complementary services in nutrition and child protection, while providing technical support to strengthen national social protection systems.

UNICEF Sierra Leone supports the integration of gender-based violence response services in social protection interventions. Building on the government decision to expand the existing National Social Safety Net to respond effectively to the impact of COVID on children and families, UNICEF supported the extension of training on gender-based violence (GBV) and psychosocial support to frontline social protection workers and strengthen awareness of existing GBV services.

Adaptations to ongoing UNICEF programmes

Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)

The regional RCCE Working Group has created social media channels, for example on Facebook and LinkedIn, to engage youth and francophone RCCE actors within the region through contextualized and easy to adapt materials, tools and guidance, complementing the group’s public community engagement website, which already includes resources in several national languages.

Provision of Health Services

UNICEF continues its technical support in social mobilization and community engagement to strengthen continuity of health services (immunization) in a context where some people fear going to health centers and in the face of stigmatization of health workers/agents. UNICEF country offices in the region were supported through two virtual multi-country peers to peer learning meetings:

The first meeting on digital solutions allowed Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, DRC and Nigeria to share how they adopted existing and new digital solutions (like UReport, WhatsApp and ODK) to conduct assessments and inform allocation of WASH facilities at health centers, notify and track COVID19 cases and contracts, communicate COVID19 information and counter myths, and conduct virtual COVID-19 training for health workers.

The second meeting on continuity of immunization services showed how Cabo Verde, Liberia, Burkina Faso and Senegal resumed previously disrupted outreach services by implementing COVID-19 infection prevention and control measures. Among the good practices shared were virtual supervision of outreach activities using zoom and WhatsApp, the training and equipping of health workers with personal protective equipment, and joint contingency immunization and communications plans.
Lessons from both meetings are being documented to guide countries on current and future epidemic readiness and response.

Nutrition

UNICEF developed a questionnaire on breastfeeding & COVID-19 that has been shared widely with “U-Reporters” in the region on social media. A second U-Report survey focusing on nutrition services during COVID-19 will be released shortly. The results of these surveys will inform nutrition teams in the region on the level of knowledge on nutrition issues and adherence to good practices, especially in the COVID-19 context.

Child Protection

Child protection interventions continue to focus on increasing humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable, including children in conflict-affected regions, and on strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities and children within the context of COVID-19. In certain regions affected by conflict, strategies have been successfully put in place to mitigate the challenges posed by the shrinkage of humanitarian space due to both security and COVID-19 related measures. For example, due to the continuous threats to humanitarian agencies and confinement measures taken by governments to address COVID-19, countries such as Burkina Faso, Chad, DRC, Mali and Niger have adapted service delivery by providing psychosocial support to children and families using mobile approaches, door-to-door visits and smaller group discussions in communities.

Funding Overview

UNICEF’s West and Central Africa region has raised USD 246 million out of the required USD 424 million to respond to COVID-19. The funding gap against UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) in the region stands at 42 per cent.

External Media

Capitalizing on the UNICEF/WFP press release on the impact of COVID-19 on child malnutrition in West and Central Africa, especially in Sahel, UNICEF worked to raise awareness among partners, donors and the broader public on this critical situation, including through media work and partnerships. Efforts developed by country offices in the region to highlight specific issues affecting children in the context of the pandemic, especially in countries affected by crisis, were amplified via regional digital platforms. Stories were shared on supply deliveries, the findings of the WASH in schools report, and an article from The Lancet on malnutrition.

West and Central Africa COVID-19 information site : https://www.unicef.org/wca/coronavirus

UNICEF in action in West and Central Africa

Mali: Kola Amadou Ba, 22, a young actor for peace, uses a megaphone to spread the word about COVID-19 prevention while aboard a motorized tricycle in Mopti, Mali. Young women and men like him, who have been trained in peaceful resolution of conflict and the promotion of social cohesion in this notoriously unstable region, have now also taken up the role of sensitizing their peers on COVID-19 in marketplaces, bus stations and other places of mass gathering.

Ghana: UNICEF Supply Officer Pharaoh Semanhyia inspects hand-washing facilities to be handed over to the Ministry of Health in Tamale, North Ghana. UNICEF Ghana has been supporting the Ministry of Health with pedal-operated hand washing facilities. These are distributed to health centres across the country to promote good hygiene and help curb the spread of the coronavirus.
Mauritania: In Nouakchott, a young boy washes his hands under the benevolent gaze of UNICEF C4D Specialist.

Côte d’Ivoire: Students attending classes at the primary school of San Pedro, in southwest Côte d’Ivoire. Due to COVID-19, schools were closed for several weeks. Classes started with children wearing masks, washing their hands regularly, and keeping physical distance.

DRC: Elikya institute in Mbandaka, DR Congo. On Monday, 10 August, schools across DR Congo reopened their doors to allow students in the final years of primary and secondary school to take their exams.


Who to contact for further information:

Marie-Pierre Poirier
Regional Director
West and Central Africa
Regional Office
Tel: +221 77 450 4237
Email: mppoirier@unicef.org

Rene Ehounou Ekpini
Regional Advisor Health,
West and Central Africa
Regional Office
Tel: +66 (0) 23569235
Email: rekpini@unicef.org

Sandra Bisin
Regional Chief Communication
West and Central Africa
Regional Office
Tel: +221 77 819 2300
Email: sbisin@unicef.org