UNICEF Statement

Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on the disruption of immunization and basic health services due to the COVID-19 pandemic

NEW YORK, 26 March 2020: “Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic is overstretching health services as health workers are diverted to support the response.

“Physical distancing is leading parents to make the difficult decision to defer routine immunization.

“Medical goods are in short supply and supply chains are under historic strain due to transport disruptions. Flight cancellations and trade restrictions by countries have severely constrained access to essential medicines, including vaccines.

“As the pandemic progresses, critical life-saving services, including immunization, will likely be disrupted, especially in Africa, Asia and the Middle East where they are sorely needed.

“At the greatest risk are children from the poorest families in countries affected by conflicts and natural disasters.

“We are particularly concerned about countries that are battling measles, cholera or polio outbreaks while responding to COVID-19 cases, such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, the Philippines, Syria and South Sudan. Not only would such outbreaks tax already stretched health services, they could also lead to additional loss of lives and suffering. At a time like this, these countries can ill-afford to face additional outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.
“The message is clear: We must not allow lifesaving health interventions to fall victim to our efforts to address COVID-19.

“UNICEF is committed to supporting basic health care and immunization needs in the worst affected countries, and to doing so in a way that limits the risk of COVID-19 transmission. We are working hard to ensure adequate vaccine supplies are available in countries that need them. We are in close communication with global vaccine suppliers to ensure production is not disrupted and supply is managed in the best possible manner under these difficult circumstances. We are also providing greater support to governments to continue the supply of vaccines during this pandemic.

“In the days to come, governments may have to temporarily postpone preventive mass vaccination campaigns in many places to ensure that the delivery of immunization services does not contribute to COVID-19 spread, and to follow recommendations on physical distancing.

“UNICEF strongly recommends that all governments begin rigorous planning now to intensify immunization activities once the COVID-19 pandemic is under control. These vaccination activities must focus on children who will miss vaccine doses during this period of interruption and prioritize the poorest and most vulnerable children. To successfully roll-out vaccines against COVID-19 when they become available, we need to ensure that our immunization programmes remain robust and can reach those that will need these vaccines the most.

“Immunization remains a life-saving health intervention. As the world’s biggest buyer and supplier of vaccines, UNICEF will continue to play a pivotal role in supporting governments’ current and future immunization efforts.”

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Notes to editor

Download multimedia content on COVID-19 outbreak, handwashing and vaccines here: [https://uni.cf/2WydpEk](https://uni.cf/2WydpEk)

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world’s toughest places, to reach the world’s most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.
UNICEF PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF scales up support in 145 countries to keep children learning, as COVID-19 forces majority of schools worldwide to close

NEW YORK, 26 March 2020 – As nationwide school closures disrupt the education for more than 80 per cent of students worldwide, UNICEF today announced it will significantly scale up support in all countries to help children continue their learning while keeping schools safe.

“Schools in the majority of countries worldwide have closed. It is an unprecedented situation and unless we collectively act now to protect children’s education, societies and economies will feel the burden long after we’ve beaten COVID-19. In the most vulnerable communities, the impact will span generations,” said Robert Jenkins, UNICEF Global Chief of Education.

“Based on lessons learned with the school closures in response to Ebola, the longer children stay away from school, the less likely they are to ever return.
Giving children alternative ways to learn and also by doing so, rebuild a routine is a critical part of our response,” said Jenkins.

To help curb the disruption to children’s education and keep children learning safely, UNICEF has allocated additional funding to accelerate work with governments and partners in more than 145 low- and middle-income countries. The initial global allocation of US $13 million – nearly $9 million of which is from a contribution made by the Global Partnership for Education – will be catalytic by supporting national governments and a wide range of education partners in each country to develop plans to enable a rapid, system-wide response.

The initiative will enable countries to prepare alternative learning programmes in the case of school closures and help schools keep children and their communities safe by providing vital information on handwashing and other hygiene practices. The funds will also help support children’s mental health and prevent stigma and discrimination by encouraging students to avoid stereotypes when talking about the virus.

In all 145 countries, UNICEF will work with partners to:

1. Support governments’ crisis response plans including technical assistance, rapid risk analysis, data collection, and planning for the reopening of schools.
2. Support the planning and implementation of safe school operation and risk communication including translating, printing, disseminating and implementing safe school guidelines; equipping schools with hygiene packages and circulating critical information on disease prevention; and training teachers and caregivers in psychosocial and mental health support for themselves and students.
3. Ensure continuity of learning and access to remote learning programs including designing and preparing alternative education programmes through online, radio and television.
4. Enhance knowledge sharing and capacity building for the current response and future pandemics.

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**Notes to editors**

Earlier this month, UNICEF, along with the World Health Organization and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, released operational guidance on protecting children and schools from COVID-19.

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