

UNICEF in Action

Programmes in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Emergencies

Humanitarian crises in DRC have caused waves of displacement, and UNICEF devotes a substantial portion of its resources to providing emergency assistance, in particular to children and women affected by the reoccurring violence.

Together, UNICEF, OCHA and other agencies support a Rapid Response Mechanism to react to the immediate needs of populations most affected by the emergency. Recent escalations in the conflict have increased the number of assisted people to 120,000 per month, 250 per cent higher than the 2005 average of 35,000.

UN assistance focuses on internally displaced people, who have often lost everything to the violence. Provision of Non-Food Item Family Kits provide households with basic necessities like cooking supplies, plastic sheeting for makeshift shelters, soap and jerry cans to carry water.

UN organizations provide food, basic health care, shelter, education and protection through national and international NGOs. DRC also has the largest UN peacekeeping force in history, set up to enforce the Luanda Ceasefire Agreement of 1999.

Child Protection

Conflict has devastated the lives of DRC's children, exposing them to violence and abuse and denying them opportunities for a better future. It has also engendered a social crisis leading to the rejection of children. UNICEF

is working mainly with local NGOs around the country to ensure that children, especially those most vulnerable, are provided with the protection and support they need – promoting respect for their rights and reintegrating them into biological or adoptive families.

Through communities and traditional as well as local authorities, social and legal protection mechanisms are being strengthened, while UNICEF strengthens the capacity of communities themselves to protect children. Orphans and vulnerable children get support through CARITAS, a religious network, and other partners.

Children associated with armed forces or groups suffer on all sides. Exposed to or forced to participate in violence, exploited as labour or sexually abused, they are in dire need of protection and support. UNICEF has set up transition centres for children associated with armed forces or groups, reintegrating them into their families and communities and providing them with trade skills.

Sexual violence, including attacks against children, is used by combatants as a weapon of war. UNICEF and its partners are providing judicial, medical and psychosocial assistance to women and children who are survivors of sexual violence.

Health and Nutrition

One in every five children in DRC dies before his or her fifth birthday, and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world. UNICEF works to support basic medical services across the country, rehabilitating health centres, training doctors and health personnel and obtaining much-needed supplies.

Nutrition programmes at therapeutic feeding centres target malnourished children with life-saving interventions. This is complemented with exclusive-breastfeeding promotion and good complementary feeding practices for all children. Insecticide-treated bed nets handed out to families reduce the risk of malaria. Clean water and adequate sanitation reduce the prevalence of diarrhoeal disease.

UNICEF-sponsored National Immunizations Days keep DRC's children protected from deadly childhood diseases like measles, and coverage rates are rising. Vitamin A supplements and de-worming tablets, often handed out during immunization drives, strengthen a child's immune system and offer further protection from illness.

UNICEF and its partners are working with the Government of DRC to support a national health-care system that would provide much-needed services to children and women across the country; and with the private sector on initiatives such as the fortification of wheat flour with iron.

Education

The educational system in DRC has been devastated by long years of conflict. Many school-age children have been forced to accompany armed forces or groups, denying them hope for a better future. With each year of continuing conflict, the barriers that prevent children from attending school increase.

Despite the challenges, UNICEF is making real progress in getting girls and boys to school. Teacher training and school rehabilitation encourages enrolment, as does ensuring that each school has adequate provisions for clean water and latrines.

In the eastern DRC, emergency School-in-a-Box kits allow makeshift classrooms to provide a semblance of normality. Psychosocial programmes offer additional support to children who have experienced trauma.

Cultural factors are often barriers to girls' education, and UNICEF's focus on increasing girls' enrolment has shown promising results. Through campaigning to reduce school fees and increase the quality of basic education, UNICEF and its partners are working to ensure that every child in DRC can go to school.

HIV/AIDS

For women and children who live surrounded by conflict, HIV/AIDS is a part of everyday life. Weak health-care systems and poor disease surveillance mean that the extent of infection is not known, but HIV is estimated to affect about 1.2 million people. UNICEF is working to make the HIV/AIDS response a national priority.

Currently, only 2 per cent of HIV-positive mothers in the DRC receive crucial drugs to prevent transmission of the virus to their babies. UNICEF and its partners support anti-retroviral therapy for infected mothers, but the lack of infrastructure and a basic health-care system are major barriers to providing universal access.

Education about how to prevent and manage HIV/AIDS is an essential first line of defence against the virus. UNICEF trains peer educators to reach young people with HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness messages across the country.

Water and Sanitation

Without clean water and adequate sanitation, children fall sick and are vulnerable to disease. Diarrhoea contributes to over 1 in 10 deaths in DRC and is largely preventable. UNICEF supports hygiene and sanitation education in communities to increase awareness about the importance of clean water and adequate latrines. It also promotes the construction and use of family latrines and the protection of water point and natural sources.

Crowded conditions in camps for internally displaced people can become breeding grounds for disease. UNICEF provides for the water and sanitation needs of these displaced. The emergency response includes interventions that range from water trucking to the construction of blocks of temporary latrines to the distribution of soap and jerry cans.

Clean water and adequate sanitation in schools are key factors in increasing enrolment. Lack of basic facilities can keep children, and especially girls, from attending. UNICEF is working to provide water and sanitation facilities in schools across DRC and advocating for hygiene education to be included in the standard curriculum.