

CREATING AWARENESS ABOUT COVID-19 IN ETHIOPIA

In this COVID-19 pandemic, timely access to accurate information can be the difference between life and death. The stakes are high in developing countries like Ethiopia where millions of people have limited access to information because of low media access, insufficient internet penetration, illiteracy, and language diversity.

“Our deepest worry is that segments of the population are on the wrong side of the information divide,” says UNICEF Representative Adele Khodr. “Typically, these are marginalized urban populations, the rural poor, or children who have no access to critical and child-friendly information. In this pandemic, when everyone should be aware of the risks posed by COVID-19 and, most importantly, be informed about how to protect themselves and their families, leaving these populations in the dark will be catastrophic for the country.”

UNICEF is drawing on years of experience in risk communication, in Ethiopia and globally, to support national risk awareness efforts. Three urgent priorities have underpinned this effort:

Establishing a national risk communication plan. UNICEF has seconded two Communication for Development (C4D) experts to the Ethiopian Public Health Institute (EPHI) to assist in developing a coherent risk communication and community engagement plan. For similar purposes, nine C4D professionals have been positioned in the regional capitals and Addis Ababa City Administration. A national risk communication plan is in place, under the leadership of the government, through which a package of key messages has been developed and shared with rapid response teams, the media, hotel managers, religious leaders, industrial park workers, airport crew and support staff, among others. A hotline – 8335 - is being used by EPHI to receive and respond to public calls and to monitor rumors and misinformation. EPHI is also using Talkwalker, a social listening tool, to monitor COVID-19 conversations on social media to quickly pick up and address misinformation.

Disseminating information. Current efforts include dissemination of key messages to targeted vulnerable populations, adolescents, and children through printed materials, to which UNICEF has contributed 400,000 brochures and 35,000 posters in Amharic and Afan Oromo. More than 10,000 brochures have been distributed to vulnerable families under the Urban Productive Safety Net Programme and the rest through the health system.

The Ministry of Health and EPHI have been very active in disseminating prevention messages on radio and television, at federal and regional levels, reaching a potential audience of 30 million people. Five radio spots on prevention, rumours, and stigma were produced with direct support from UNICEF and are airing. Ethio-Telecom has pitched in with text and phone messages, which reportedly reached 21 million people within days of being introduced.

UNICEF is finalizing an agreement with Save the Children to broadcast messages tailored for children on national and regional mass media in Amharic, Afan Oromo, Afari, Somali, and Tigrigna languages. Social media outreach has also been key to public sensitization; for example, UNICEF's platforms alone have reached four million people in Ethiopia since 22nd March, the numbers boosted by an animation video and another of children performing a popular song from childhood.

Stepping up inter-personal communication: Community engagement through inter-personal communication is a key strategy for reaching hard-to-reach and vulnerable populations. Some 5,000 community leaders, volunteers and health workers are being oriented on COVID-19, and they in turn are expected to reach at least 2.5 million people with key prevention messages. UNICEF is in the process of finalizing a partnership with the Ethiopian Red Cross to deploy 1,500 volunteers countrywide to reach nine million people, including refugees.

“Prevention remains our biggest, most potent, and most cost-effective weapon to stopping the spread of COVID-19,” says Khodr. “This means we must do everything humanly possible to reach and teach everyone about the risks of COVID-19.”

In tandem with risk communication are ongoing preventive and life-saving efforts to address the needs of vulnerable children and their families. UNICEF supplies valued at US\$ 3m are already under procurement and they include much-needed Personal Protective Kits, oxygen concentrators, sanitizers, chlorine, buckets, water storage tanks, and disinfection kits. Some 21 essential drugs kits have been prepositioned in the regions and in Addis Ababa to treat 52,500 COVID-19 patients.

Ethiopia's low **water, sanitation and hygiene** coverage predisposes children to higher risks of COVID-19. UNICEF is prioritizing provision of soap, sanitizers and other hygiene products to vulnerable populations, while simultaneously ensuring water supply systems remain viable. To date, 60,000 bars of soap have been distributed to vulnerable families in the public safety net programme and large quantities of hygiene products, chlorine, buckets, water containers, disinfection kits and IEC materials are being distributed to hospitals, health centers, and communities in the regions. UNICEF has provided large-capacity water tanks and motorized pumps to the isolation centers at Arat Kilo, Eka-Kotebe Hospital, Bole-Chefe, and Bole Community School in Addis Ababa, in addition to other infection control items.

A key issue is whether current COVID-19 mitigation and response measures consider the specific needs of children. In other words, is the system set up to properly manage children needing isolation or treatment. With UNICEF support, the government has developed a **child protection response plan** which, among other things, gives technical guidance to prevent

family separations and on how to care for and provide psychosocial support to children affected by COVID-19.

“Through our teams in Addis Ababa and the regions, we will continue to review our response plan, currently costed at US\$28m, to ensure that children and the most vulnerable receive the support they need,” says Khodr. “We count on the continued support of the government, donors, and implementing partners to safeguard the lives of the most vulnerable.”



Essential Drugs Kits are loaded for dispatch to Dire Dawa from the UNICEF warehouse in Addis Ababa.
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In March 2020, UNICEF supporter and renowned singer Zeritu Kebede hands over soap to Ayelech Woldemichael (80), a beneficiary of the urban productive social safety net programme in Addis Ababa. Thanks to social workers from the *woreda* Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs, Ayelech was well-informed about COVID-19 and had voluntarily stopped attending church gatherings to minimize the risks.

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