

PUTTING HYGIENE AT THE HEART OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN ETHIOPIA

Maintaining personal hygiene through frequent handwashing with soap is at the heart of preventing COVID-19. But these efforts risk being undermined by the stark reality for millions of people in Ethiopia: hygiene is often not possible because safe water and soap are simply not readily available or are unaffordable.

The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene which tracks country, regional and global trends, paints quite a staggering picture of the situation in Ethiopia: 41 per cent of households have no handwashing facility on their premises and 51 per cent have a handwashing facility but have neither soap nor water. Put differently, 96 million of the country's estimated population of 105 million have no or have limited capacity to regularly wash their hands with soap.

“While progress has been made over the years to improve hygiene, the task before us is enormous and is made even more urgent by the COVID-19 outbreak,” says UNICEF Representative Adele Khodr. “Under the leadership of the government, and together with donors and our civil society partners, we have significantly increased our efforts to reach poor and marginalized communities with soap and water. Last week alone, for example, we distributed soap to over 350,000 of the most vulnerable households countrywide.”

In **Addis Ababa**, following a request from the Ministry of Water, Irrigation, and Energy, UNICEF is improving water supply and hygiene in COVID-19 isolation and quarantine centers, primary health centers and most at-risk households in coordination with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. In March, UNICEF handed over soap to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs for 30,000 vulnerable households under the Urban Productive Social Safety Net programme. In total, over 350,000 people have been reached with critical water, sanitation and hygiene supplies, and sanitation has been improved in four health facilities. An additional 3,000 bars of soap have been given to the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs for children living on the street.

In **Gambella**, UNICEF has positioned six water trucks and a similar number of large capacity bladder tanks to provide water to refugees at Kule, Teirkidi and Ngunyyiel refugee camps. An estimated 180,000 people will benefit. In addition, 12 water tanks, with a storage capacity of 10,000 liters each, along with knapsack sprayers, buckets, chlorine, and protective gear have been dispatched to health facilities this week.

The regional government has set up an isolation and treatment center at Gambella University. However, there was no water at the institution, prompting UNICEF to install an emergency water treatment plant to serve the center and 8,000 people from surrounding communities.

In **Amhara**, UNICEF has provided infection prevention supplies and water tanks to four Emergency Operation Cells and isolation sites.

“Investing in hygiene will not only prevent the spread of the coronavirus, but also contribute to overall prevention of water-borne diseases in the medium-term and help to build positive, disease prevention behaviours,” says Khodr. “As we may have to live with this challenging situation for quite a while, handwashing with soap is an essential part of our formula for survival.”

UNICEF is ensuring that the different needs of girls and boys, men and women across all ages and the needs of persons with disabilities are factored into service provision.

The Ministry of Education, together with UNICEF, Save the Children, and READ II, a five-year literacy programme funded by USAID, is developing a framework for continuous learning through radio and television. This national framework will provide much-needed standard guidance for the regions where long-distance learning is either being mooted or already underway. In Oromia, for example, the education bureau is working with five radio stations to reach 10 million students from pre-primary to secondary level. In Tigray, radio-based distance learning for school children started on 30th March and is reaching 95 per cent of the region.

The huge spike in Ethiopian deportees arriving from the Gulf Region is presenting the government with unique challenges. UNICEF is working the International Office of Migration (IOM) to mitigate these challenges: on 3rd April, 2,000 dignity kits, 30 recreation kits, and 2,000 bars of soap were distributed to returnees at the Addis Ababa Science and Technology University. Both agencies are supporting a comprehensive process of registering and managing each individual returnee, a task made especially complicated by the need to observe necessary COVID-19 protective measures for staff and returnees.

“It is important that as we respond to the coronavirus, we do not lose sight of other areas of human need,” says Khodr. “Life has not stopped, thus we must do all we can to ensure that vulnerable children receive treatment when they fall ill, that they continue to learn and develop, albeit in different ways and circumstances, and that they continue to be protected from gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse.”

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This emergency water plant has been erected to supply water to the COVID-19 isolation and treatment center at Gambella University. It will supply 12,000 liters of water per hour to the center and the surrounding community.
UNICEF Ethiopia/2020



In April 2020, health staff go about their work at the COVID-19 isolation center at Bole-Chefe in Addis Ababa. UNICEF has helped to improve water supply, hygiene, and infection control at the center.
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