Situation Overview and Humanitarian Needs

In February, the number of people who contracted coronavirus kept rising and the restrictive measures continued to be imposed. As of 28th of February the number of cases stood at 83,212, with 5,444 active cases and 607 reported deaths. In West and Central Africa, Ghana saw the second highest number of coronavirus cases

On the 24th of February 2021, Ghana became the first country in the world to receive the COVID-19 vaccine through the COVAX Facility, with support from WHO, GAVI, CEPI, UNICEF and partners. The Emirates flight EK0787 landed at Kotoka International Airport at 7:30am, bringing a cargo of 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India (SII) and 600,000 syringes.

In his televised address on the 28th of February, His Excellency the President of the Republic of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, announced that the 600,000 doses would be targeted to the 43 districts with the highest concentration of cases across three regions: 25 districts in Greater Accra, 16 in the Ashanti Region and two in the Central Region. The President also outlined priority groups for receipt of the vaccine, including health and front line workers, persons over 60 years of age and persons with underlying medical conditions.
UNICEF’s COVID-19 response in Ghana

In close cooperation with the UN Country Team, UNICEF in Ghana continues to support the government’s overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other critical humanitarian risks, across the sectors below.

Health

Between January and end of February 2021, the Kumasi Public Health Reference Laboratory conducted 2,106 COVID-19 tests, out of which 581 were positive. The samples were received from districts within the Ashanti region. This facility has reduced the turnaround time for test results from an average of three to four days to 24 hours. To further decentralize COVID-19 testing across Ghana, UNICEF supported the Western Regional Health Directorate to expand and equip it to enable it to undertake COVID-19 testing. This involved increased working space to enhance PCR testing, the provision of a conducive and reliable place for laboratory services and support for laboratory testing for COVID-19 samples taken from all 14 districts in the Western Region.

In February UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Ghana Health Service (GHS) and Ministry of Health (MoH) to finalize and submit the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan within a very short timeline for approval, which contributed to Ghana becoming the first country to receive the COVID-19 vaccines from the COVAX Facility (WHO, GAVI, CEPI, UNICEF). UNICEF procured and shipped the vaccines, syringes and cold chain equipment, and supported the Government with social mobilization efforts. WHO and UNICEF provided support to the Government in planning the vaccination campaign and training health workers.

During the reporting period, UNICEF supported five regions (Upper East, Northern, North East, Savannah and Ashanti) to train 759 regional and district level health staff and more than 3600 Community Health Management Committee (CHMC) members on how to use a community score card. This is an online dashboard where health workers can input progress against an agreed set of indicators. The dashboard is designed to hold districts accountable at national level and to ensure service continuity against a set indicators, in the context of COVID-19. It also serves to empower the Community Health Management Committee (CHMC) members to hold health staff accountable for quality health care.

Nutrition

As the convener of the Scaling up Nutrition – Development Partners (SUN-DP), UNICEF supported the Government of Ghana and nutrition partners to review the inter-agency nutrition response plan to COVID-19. The plan has been implemented for the last six months by Government agencies and development partners. The purpose of the review was to take stock of progress and identify areas that may be lagging behind. From the review, 75 percent of the planned activities are on track or completed, while 25% require acceleration.

With the support of the China’s South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, UNICEF provided the Government of Ghana with essential health and nutrition supplies to respond to COVID-19 in the North East Region. The nutrition supplies and health equipment, worth US$ 1 Million, will serve and benefit 115,112 children, 128,925 adolescents and 23,022 women in the targeted region. They will help to improve newborn care and child health as well as prevent, detect and treat severe acute malnutrition.
UNICEF supported the Ghana Health Service in the Upper East Region to train 60 nutrition officers on nutrition programming, planning, budgeting and coordination in the context of COVID-19 and empowering them to be able to advocate for domestic funding for nutrition programs in the region.

The fourth quarter Food and Nutrition Monitoring System (FSNMS) Bulletin was completed, with an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on food and nutrition. The bulletin shows that fewer children under five years received Growth Monitoring and Promotion services in the fourth quarter of 2020, as compared to the same period in 2019. Additionally, there was a low coverage of vitamin A supplementation in the second semester of 2020.

Since the schools re-opened in January, UNICEF has been supporting the Ghana Health Service and Ghana Education Service to reshape the school health and nutrition programmes to adapt to the COVID-19 context by updating the communication materials. In addition, due to significant changes and movements in teaching staff and health workers during, UNICEF has strengthened the capacity of teachers and health workers on Girls’ Iron Folate Tablet Supplement and Nutrition Friendly School Initiative (NFSI) programmes.

Water Sanitation and Hygiene

UNICEF continued to support the COVID-19 WASH response through supplies procurement, institutional facilities rehabilitation and coordination.

In partnership with the Ghana Health Service, UNICEF delivered institutional hygiene supplies to schools and health care facilities to districts with the highest number of coronavirus cases (in the Northern, North-East, Central, Greater Accra, Eastern and Volta Regions). Supplies include bins, handwashing facilities, light and heavy personal protective equipment (PPE), liquid soap, chlorine and hand sanitizer. These items are intended to benefit at least 90 schools and 30 health care facilities.

In February, progress was made in improving sanitation in twenty-two (22) health facilities across the Greater Accra and Northern Regions. Works undergone have included toilet repairs, mechanization of boreholes, water storage improvement and drilling of boreholes. Water Safety has been a priority for infection prevention and control in health care facilities. UNICEF, with the Institutional Care Division of the GHS, has begun engagement to integrate risk-based drinking water quality management into health facility procedures and guidelines.

Child Protection

During the period under review, 2,619 people (891 Girls, 645 Boys, 488 Women and 595 Men) were engaged in the Greater Accra, Eastern and Volta regions on COVID-19 prevention and child protection, and on the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Community facilitators used tools such as the maize plant, circle of support, adolescent and child protection flashcards from the Child Protection Community Facilitation toolkits, to engage target audiences on verbal abuse and neglect, online safety, child marriage and SGBV among others. The engagements took place in churches, schools and homes.
The Ghanaians Against Child Abuse (GACA) campaign continues to reach out to people with information about COVID-19 and child protection related helplines and better parenting messages.

The Judicial Service of Ghana trained 20 newly appointed Judges to be able to handle cases of Sexual and Gender based Violence, using the GBV Training Manual. The Judges discussed trends related to sexual violence against women and children and the vulnerabilities that the COVID-19 pandemic imposes on children, exposing them to a higher risk of sexual violence.

Education

UNICEF continues to support the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ghana Education Service (GES) in the effective sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In ensuring ownership, sustainability and drive for the roll-out of interventions, over 50 GES management team members at the national and sub-national levels have gained skills to: 1) strengthen remote and distant learning service delivery, especially reaching the most vulnerable; 2) strengthen education system resilience for effective planning, coordination and management of continuous/distance and remote learning at all levels; and 3) enhance education sector recovery initiatives for improved safety, protection, enrolment and learning. This engagement harnessed massive support for the delivery of the national radio learning and other COVID-19 related programmes, and it is expected to benefit over eight million students in basic schools.

To complement the radio learning programme, UNICEF and the Ghana Library Authority’s initiative to promote reading through the mobile library vans have distributed supplementary readers to 5,032 learners (2,448 boys; 2,584 girls). So far, and with the commencement of schools, both radio and home-based learning programmes have still maintained the listening coverage and 6,278,484 learners (3,195,982 boys and 3,082,502 girls) from KG-JHS3 are engaged.

In improving the quality of education in low performing basic education schools and strengthening education sector equity and accountability in Ghana, especially in this time of COVID-19, UNICEF and the World Bank have influenced and scaled-up differentiated learning. This has been achieved through the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Targeted Instruction (TI) through the GES In-Service Education Training structure. The partnership has also established a cadre of 1,260 resource persons, involving 20 national trainers (NTs), 200 master trainers (MTs); and 1,040 district Teacher Support Teams (DTSTs) across the country. These officials have been equipped with skills aimed at bridging equity gaps by improving children’s performance in foundational literacy, numeracy in their grades and principles of UDL to address the learning needs of children with special needs, including those with disabilities.

UNICEF supported the MoE/GES to embark on a mass-media and Inter-personal communication (IPC) back-to-school campaign initiative aimed at ensuring that every child is in school, safe and learning. The initiative used different campaign packages on safety and protection of children, guidelines on prevention of pregnancy among school girls and re-entry for young mothers after childbirth, right age enrolment, psychosocial support for children, and disability. The ongoing IPC have since reached over 200,000 members within 2,350 communities with messages aimed at getting children, especially the vulnerable ones - young children, girls and those with special needs - back to school.

Risk Communication & Community Engagement

UNICEF supported the development of a National Communication Strategy for COVID-19 Vaccine Introduction jointly with key stakeholders, including the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) and Health Promotion Divisions (HPD) of the Ghana Health Service, WHO and other partners. UNICEF has contributed to the development of key messages, questions and answers, posters, leaflets and jingles on the COVID-19 vaccination roll out.

Community engagement on COVID-19 safety protocols continued in partnership with the local CSOs (Dawah Academy, Bido, RISE Ghana, Community Radio, Theatre for Social Change). A total of 232,160 people were reached with messaging on prevention through mobile van announcements, market storms and radio jingles. Influencers recorded video clips and Infomercials on COVID-19 preventive behaviors and stigma in key local languages and broadcasted by the Network of Community Radio and TV channels. The video clips reached more than nine million
Advocacy meetings with religious and community leaders as well as radio magazine programmes engaged over 10,000 people in discussions on the importance to continue strict adherence to health protocols. Health Facility Committees, District Assemblies, Traders and Transport Owners were involved in community engagement activities as influencers in the village setting. Over 15 community volunteers were trained on interactive theatre performance and interactive theatre performances, starting in three communities.

Over 4,691 people shared their concerns and asked questions related to COVID-19 through focus groups, community visits and through the Agoo call center.

UNICEF has been supporting the GES with messages on safety protocols in schools. In addition, a series of Short Message Service (sms) were sent to encourage parents to send their children back to school. The messages also provided information on safety protocols to more than 12 million people. Mural painting on COVID-19 is ongoing to ensure adequate information sharing, targeting children on the adherence of COVID-19 prevention protocol.

Two weeks after school had re-opened, UNICEF launched a survey through the U-Report tool to give young people, especially those who were back in school, to share their opinions after learning from home for 10 months. 58% of the respondents were male and 44% female.

Responses show that:
- 69% responded “YES” to returning to school when restrictions on school closures were lifted on 15 January 2021; out of these, 38% were mostly concerned about catching up with missed lessons, while 53% were concerned about contracting COVID-19 and people not adhering to safety and hygiene protocols like wearing of masks.
- 31% did not return to school for various reasons, although 43% of those who said “NO” are no longer students; 36% did not return because of financial/economic difficulties, 13% said they were afraid of contracting COVID-19, and 3% reported having gotten pregnant or married.
- 70% of the students who had returned to school reported that COVID-19 protocols were being observed in school, 13% were not sure. For those who reported that protocols were not being observed, 41% said that people were not wearing their masks (42%) and 34% mentioned that social distancing was not being observed. 20% of those who said no also reported that there are no hand washing facilities in their school.
- 54% of student respondents are still relying on long distance learning tools such as TV, radio and the internet.

Prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccines in Ghana, U-Report and UNICEF social media channels were used to collate feedback from audiences on the general perception on the vaccines. Messages were disseminated to ascertain the rate of vaccine hesitancy. These messages reached over 1.6 million people across social media channels.

In addition to supporting education and awareness raising about COVID-19 vaccines, a COVAX information center has been launched on the UNICEF Ghana website where audiences have access to FAQs, latest articles and press releases: https://www.unicef.org/ghana/covax-information-centre

Social Policy

UNICEF has completed the analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on households and children based on a longitudinal national representative phone survey, with 2,578 households and 1,848 caretakers of children. Data collection was conducted a second time in September 2020, in collaboration with the Ghana Statistical Services and the World Bank. The study will allow for the tracking of COVID-19 pandemic impacts on children’s wellbeing over time and inform potential policy interventions.

There are some changes in the situation of children between June and September 2020. For example, the share of children exposed to physical punishment in their households continuously increased from 18.3% before March 16, 2020, to 26.1% and 28.9% in June and September 2020 respectively. On the other hand, the percentage of children living in
households whose primary breadwinner had not worked in the seven days preceding the survey had fallen from 28.9% in June to 21.0% in September 2020. Urban areas registered the most extensive recovery.

The third wave of data will be collected in March 2021 and will follow a trend analysis of the longitudinal data collected.

Supplies

UNICEF facilitated the smooth receipt and delivery of 600,000 doses of the AztraZeneca vaccines shipped by the Serum institute of India and accompanying devices, through the COVAX Facility (WHO, GAVI, CEPI, UNICEF), with support from donors. The office in Ghana closely coordinated the timely placement of the purchase order in collaboration with the UNICEF Supply Division and ensured the timely arrival and clearance at the airport tarmac.


UNICEF supply and logistics team also distributed 3,000 cartons of Ready to Use Therapeutic Food, 37 cartons of F75 and 29 cartons F100 to the North East region, with support from the China Cooperation Fund. This is part of essential nutrition supplies earmarked to be shipped to four other regions in the coming weeks (Savannah, Northern, Upper West and Upper East).


Funding Overview and Partnerships

Since the beginning of the crisis in March 2020, UNICEF has been able to support the national response thanks to the strategic support of development partners and private donors such as the World Bank (PEF), the UK Government, USAID, the Government of Japan, China International Development and Cooperation Agency, Standard Chartered and the Mastercard Foundation. Recently, the Government of Korea provided an in-kind donation of KF94 facemasks through UNICEF. The Government of Denmark has also committed DKK 35 million in thematic funds to the Humanitaria Action for Children (HAC) in Ghana. Other development cooperation agencies and partners such as Global Affairs Canada have expressed commitment to further support the delivery of results for children across the country.

In 2021, UNICEF is requesting US$26.9 million to reach 2.4 million people in need. UNICEF’s strategy in Ghana involves protecting children and their families from exposure to the COVID-19 virus, minimizing mortality and supporting the continuity of services across all sectors, while ensuring preparedness for potential humanitarian crises. As of January 2021, the 2021 UNICEF HAC in Ghana presented a funding gap of $23.4M. UNICEF continues to coordinate closely with the UN Country Team in Ghana in support the national COVID-19 response, in line with the approved plans.

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