Highlights

- The pandemic finished the year on an upward trend, which started in November 2020. All 24 countries in the region are still reporting cases of community transmission.

- As of 29 March 2021, 569,646 confirmed cases and 8,126 deaths (CFR: 1.43 per cent) have been reported in the 24 countries of WCAR.

- Despite the efforts made by Governments, testing capacities are still limited at the national level with testing strategies oriented towards travellers. To date, The SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern identified in South Africa has been detected in DRC, Gambia and Ghana and the one identified in the UK has been isolated in DRC, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

- In 2020, 11.7 million people were reached with critical WASH services out of 12.8 million people targeted (91 per cent progress), including an estimated 6 million people who are living in conflict/humanitarian settings.

- A total of 205,000 healthcare facility staff and community health workers were trained in infection prevention and control procedures (49 per cent progress), and 400,000 healthcare staff have been provided with personal protective equipment (69 per cent progress).

- During the second half of 2020, UNICEF focused on supporting countries to reopen schools and begin the 2020-2021 school year. By the end of the year, 22 out of 24 countries in WCAR have started the 2020-2021 school year.

Situation Overview and Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has been ongoing in WCAR since the first cases were reported in early March 2020. The analysis of the epidemic curve has shown that the peak in confirmed cases and associated deaths was reached around mid-June 2020 followed by a decrease until the end of August 2020.

With the easing of lockdowns, an increase in cases have been noticed since the end of September/beginning of October. All countries in the region were still reporting cases of community transmission by the end of the year.
According to estimates by regional nutrition partners and national counterparts, more than 14.2 million cases of global acute malnutrition are expected in children under 5 in 2021, on which 4.3 million will be affected by its most severe form.

In 2020, in a region where more than 8 out of 10 children experience violence in the home, more than 1 in 10 children have experienced sexual violence, with the highest rates of child marriage globally, and over 7 million children forcibly displaced due to armed conflict, the child protection sector as a whole had to rapidly adapt its strategies to a fast-changing environment with millions of new children being potentially at increased risk due to COVID-19.

Coordination and Partnerships

The UNICEF Regional Office has supported the roll-out of the COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) initiative through preparedness activities for the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccines in Africa.

In the last quarter of 2020, UNICEF continued to actively facilitate and support the regional coordination platforms, by leading the Regional Nutrition Working Group and its Nutrition In-Emergency sub-group and co-leading the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG). Together with the Regional FSNWG working group, UNICEF issued a second advocacy note on the medium- and long-term impacts on COVID-19 on the food security and nutritional situation in the region, targeting especially institutional partners.

Despite the challenges in terms of access and the unprecedented scale of needs, UNICEF and partners quickly adapted service delivery models to reach over 1.4 million children and caregivers with mental health and psychosocial support, more than 42,000 children without parental care, nearly 3,000 children released from detention, over 640,000 children on the move, over 210,000 women and children with response and prevention support for gender based violence, and nearly half a million adolescent girls with services to prevent child marriage.

UNICEF’s COVID-19 response

Health

Despite the challenging operating environment with lockdowns and travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF was able to provide continued (remote) support to all countries to ensure the continuity of essential maternal, newborn and child health service. Technical assistance through sharing/dissemination of good/emerging practices in ensuring the continuity of routine immunization and vaccination campaigns was provided to all countries in WCAR. In countries affected by humanitarian crises (Burkina Faso, DRC, CAR) technical guidance and support was provided to implement innovative approaches for social distancing and ensure continuous provision of routine vaccination and campaigns as well as other essential maternal newborn and child health services.

Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)

UNICEF provided support to the national coordination mechanisms of ten countries on Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE), for capacity building, on research tools, technical briefs, and the implementation of national strategies, working in close partnerships with WHO and IFRC and as part of the RCCE Collective Service.

Medical and WASH supplies, Infection Prevention and Control (IPC)

In 2020, 11.7 million people have been reached with critical WASH services out of 12.8 million people targeted (91 per cent progress), including an estimated 6 million people who are living in conflict/humanitarian settings. A total of 205,000 healthcare facility staff and community health workers were trained in infection prevention and control procedures (49 per cent progress), and 400,000 healthcare staff have been provided with personal protective equipment (69 per cent progress).
The regional team has been instrumental in providing remote technical assistance to Country Offices in the development of response plans and mapping of the impact of COVID-19. UNICEF has quickly advocated for the integration of all new WASH activities related to COVID-19 into existing regular programs, especially for sanitation, hand hygiene (with the launch of the global Hand Hygiene for All campaign), and WASH in health care facilities.

Nutrition

According to data available at this stage, almost 1.8 million children under five were admitted for SAM treatment in 2020, out of 3.1 million targeted (59 percent); however, this figure will be higher since all data have not yet been transmitted by countries to the Regional Office.

During the last quarter of 2020, four countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger) carried-out National Nutrition Survey (using the SMART method) by applying specific modalities related to COVID-19 pandemic protection measures. Results show an increase in the national prevalence of Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) in Burkina Faso and Niger compared to 2019 SMART results, while a decrease was recorded in Chad and Mali. However, high disparities are observed at sub-national level. In Niger especially, four out of eight regions of the country (Agadez, Maradi, Tahoua and Zinder) have a Global Acute Malnutrition prevalence of more than 10 per cent, considered as “high” according to WHO threshold; while the prevalence in Diffa region is 19.3 percent, well above the “very high” threshold of 15 per cent.

According to estimates by regional nutrition partners and national counterparts, more than 14.2 million cases of global acute malnutrition are expected in children under 5 in 2021, on which 4.3 million will be affected by its most severe form.

Education

During the second half of 2020, UNICEF has focused on supporting countries to reopen schools and begin the 2020-2021 school year. As of 31 December, 22 out of 24 countries have started the 2020-2021 school year, Ghana has planned to open in January to align with a new school calendar, while in Mali the delay in the start of the year is due to a teachers’ strike, and schools are expected to reopen in the last week of January.

Child protection

The pandemic brought key child protection issues to the fore, including sexual and gender-based violence, children in detention, socioeconomic impacts on families, increased risks of child marriage and violence for the millions of children on the move, including children in street situations and those sent away from their families for Koranic education.

Despite the challenges in terms of access and the unprecedented scale of needs, UNICEF and partners reached over 1.4 million children and caregivers with mental health and psychosocial support, more than 42,000 children without parental care, and nearly 3,000 children released from detention.

In addition, over 640,000 children on the move were reached with protective services, over 210,000 women and children with response and prevention support for gender-based violence and nearly half a million adolescent girls with services to prevent child marriage.

While civil registration services were impacted, over 11 million children had their births registered, and rates increased in nearly half of all countries in the region, resulting in only a small decrease compared to previous years.

Gender

In the context of Covid-19 and its threat of reversing many achievements made over past years, UNICEF has re-confirmed its prioritization of work on gender equality and adolescent development as transformative strategies integral to the delivery of its Key Results for Children, with a focus on education, child protection and risk communication.

The UNICEF Regional Office provided direct support to Country Offices through guidance and tools for gender-integration (webinars, rapid regional recommendations for programme integration, checklists for gender sensitive, responsive and transformative activities, and technical guidance on gender responsive and
adolescent sensitive social protection). Support to country offices has also included fundraising, advocacy, and the launch of new initiatives, such as a telephone survey which captures how women and men, and adolescents and children are affected by the virus economically and in their everyday lives across countries in the region, in collaboration with UN Women and OHCHR.

**Adaptations to ongoing UNICEF programmes**

In 2020, the child protection sector had to rapidly adapt its strategies to a fast-changing environment with millions of new children being potentially at increased risk due to COVID-19, in a region where already more than 8 out of 10 children experience violence in the home and more than 1 in 10 children have experienced sexual violence, with the highest rates of child marriage globally, and over 7 million children forcibly displaced due to armed conflict.

The WASH sector has provided remote technical assistance, reviewing Country Office response plans and carrying out a comprehensive mapping of the impact of COVID on the WASH sector as well as the state of readiness and response of UNICEF’s country offices WASH programs. Throughout the year, the Regional Office disseminated appropriate technical guidance and training opportunities, as well as elaborated and adapted context specific guidance for WCAR (ex. Regional WASH Guidance for COVID-19, Guidance on the adaptation of long-term sanitation programs, adapted tools for WASH assessments in health care facilities, guidelines and protocols for IPC and Safe School re-opening etc.).

Solid collaboration between WASH and education at regional level permitted a comprehensive support and technical guidance to countries for adapted WASH protocols for the safe school reopening. Numerous calls and webinars contributed to technical support to country offices as well as cross-country experience sharing. To sustain the gains and for long lasting effects, UNICEF has quickly advocate to integrate all new WASH activities related to COVID-19 into existing regular program, especially for sanitation, hand hygiene (with the launch of the global Hand Hygiene for All campaign supported by WCARO) and WASH in health care facilities.

**Funding Overview**

UNICEF’s West and Central Africa region has raised USD 349 million out of the required USD 424 million to respond to COVID-19. The funding gap against UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) in the region stands at 18 per cent.

![Funding Status](https://www.unicef.org/wca/coronavirus)

**External Media**

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in West and Central Africa, the UNICEF West and Central Africa regional office (WCARO) used all available tools, channels and platforms to raise awareness among international, regional and national audiences on the immediate and long-lasting impact of the pandemic on children’s education, health, nutrition and protection in the region. UNICEF WCARO worked with various partners including UN agencies, Governments, civil society and individuals such as digital influencers and goodwill ambassadors, to draw attention on the additional challenges the pandemic generated for vulnerable children and communities already facing other issues such as insecurity and climate change. A COVID-19 page was created on the UNICEF regional website, gathering key information and highlighting regional and country initiatives put in place to address the identified challenges. Media materials such as news releases and statements were developed, events such as virtual press briefings, interviews and high-level meetings were organized, resulting in wide coverage in various international, regional and national media. Several initiatives were promoted through regional digital platforms to give the opportunity to children and young people to make their voices heard and to help tackle misinformation around the pandemic. Support was provided to country offices in the region in their communication and advocacy efforts, including through information-sharing and guidance.

West and Central Africa COVID-19 information site: [https://www.unicef.org/wca/coronavirus](https://www.unicef.org/wca/coronavirus)
UNICEF in action in West and Central Africa

DR Congo: Education Minister launching the country’s first UNICEF-supported radio-based learning programme, with UNICEF DRC. © UNICEF/UNI325703/Desjardins.

Central African Republic: UNICEF-supported listening clubs in Bambari.

Sao Tome and Principe: Neusa Carvalho, Youth and Development officer, at National Television presenting UNICEF supported action plan for Youth for prevention and response to COVID-19.

Republic of Cameroon: Sensitizing on handwashing with UNICEF support.

Cote d’Ivoire: UNICEF is distributing hygiene kits as well as beds, toys and mattresses to vulnerable children in a protection center in Adjamé, Abidjan. ©UNICEF/UNI323237/Diarassouba.

Niger: UNICEF-supported Community leaders use community radios, mosque speakers, town criers and vehicles equipped with speakers to disseminate information messages. ©UNICEF/UNI322705/Haro

Guinea Bissau: UNICEF partners with national red cross volunteers on coronavirus sensitization activities in three regions affected by the pandemic.

Mauritania: UNICEF supports a hotline for the public to get the necessary information on COVID-19. ©Araia T.Alvarez

End November 2020. Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, during a school visit in Mauritania. Mauritania UN89A5387

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