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The Covid-19 crisis is a child rights crisis
The Covid-19 Crisis Is A Child Rights Crisis

On All Fronts In The Battle Against Covid-19

Strengthening Health System Capacities To Respond To Covid-19

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Young Innovators From Niger Engaged In The Battle Against Covid-19

Young People Are The Architects For A Change Against Covid-19

Covid-19: Using Humour To Cope With Social Anxiety

2.3 Million Children In Need Of Protection In The Central Sahel Region
Following the confirmation of the first positive case of COVID-19 in Niger, UNICEF has been working closely with the Government and its partners to step up the response and prevent further proliferation of the COVID-19 virus in the country, already facing the consequences of multiple crisis (nutrition, conflicts, natural disasters). While all regions are touched by the pandemic, the most affected regions remain Niamey and Zinder, the last one recently presenting a rapid increase in the number of cases.

According to its response plan, UNICEF continues to support the Government, and particularly the Ministry of Health (MoH), in the field of risk communication and community engagement (RCCE), infection prevention and control (IPC), supply and logistics, epidemiological surveillance and healthcare provision.

Moreover, the Country Office is closely working with the Ministry of Education to ensure continuity of education to children during the school closure period and with child protection actors to ensure that the needs of children on the move are met. UNICEF is co-leading three of the eight sub-committees established by the MoH (RCCE, IPC and logistics) and is an active member of the others. UNICEF is also participating to the UN COVID-19 crisis group.
What’s the situation in Niger?

Niger reported its first case of Covid-19 on March 19. Two months later, as of May 19th, the country has recorded 909 confirmed cases of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and 55 reported deaths. Out of them, 714 people already recovered and 140 are currently under treatment.

While all regions are touched by the pandemic, the most affected regions remain Niamey and Zinder, the last one recently presenting a rapid increase in the number of cases.

UNICEF closely works with the Government and its partners to step up the response and prevent further proliferation of the COVID-19 virus in the country, already facing the consequences of multiple crisis including malnutrition, conflicts and natural disasters.

In countries facing humanitarian crises like Niger, the COVID-19 outbreak is creating significant additional pressure on an already overburdened health and social service delivery systems and exacerbating vulnerabilities in affected populations.

THE COVID-19 CRISIS IS A CHILD RIGHTS CRISIS

Our Representative, Dr. Félicité Tchibindat responds to our most pressing questions on the impact of Covid-19 on children.

What’s the situation in Niger?

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In your opinion why Africa, and countries like Niger, are resisting better than the rest of the world?

As of mid-May, most African countries aren’t reporting many cases and they are also reporting very few deaths. In a continent of 1.3 billion people — 17 per cent of the world’s entire population — Africa accounts for barely two per cent of the number of infections and even less than one per cent of the number of deaths.

We currently do not have enough evidence to answer your question.

What we can say is that African countries have a long experience in dealing with infectious diseases, like Ebola or Polio. This might, in fact, be the basis of the continent’s proactive response.

In Niger, even before the country registered its first case, the Government put in place a series of restrictions and social distancing measures including school and mosque closures, movement restrictions, curfew and nationwide state of emergency.

To support the government in the area of risk communication and community
engagement, we, at UNICEF, have for example activated our existing polio eradication machinery, that includes thousands of town criers, social mobilizers, traditional and religious leaders, community media and youth across the country to raise awareness on Covid-19.

**African nations are lifting curfews and gradually returning to daily life. Is this the case of Niger and what is the risk of these measures for children?**

Yes, Niger has started easing lockdown restrictions, but easing restrictions doesn’t mean danger has passed. Still, the stakes are high, we need to stay alert and we must double our vigilance. It is a path filled with extra behavioural challenges and risks.

Easing the lockdown will mean people gradually getting more freedom to engage in social and economic activities, but also that they must take good care to keep a safe distance from others. Effective mitigation relies on people’s individual decisions to comply with social distancing measures.

In Niger, school will reopen early June. When deciding whether to reopen schools, authorities should look at the benefits and risks across education. The best interest of every child should be paramount. Safe operational guidelines should be followed to ensure that children and their families remain protected and informed. This included thorough cleaning of classrooms and facilities, stepping up the provision of safe water, increasing good hygiene practices such as hand washing, and training teachers on how to support students’ positive behavior change and their psychological well-being in times of uncertainty.

**How UNICEF and partners are helping to fight coronavirus disease in Niger?**

UNICEF is supporting the Government, and particularly the Ministry of Health (MoH), in the field of risk communication and community engagement (RCCE), infection prevention and control (IPC), supply and logistics, epidemiological surveillance and healthcare provision. We are leading on preventative actions in communities across the country with risk communication, providing hygiene and medical kits to schools and health clinics and monitoring the impact of the outbreak to support continuity of care, education and social services. UNICEF is also working to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on protection for children and women.

**Can you expand a little bit on how that works and give us some concrete examples?**

UNICEF played a key role in the development of the Government strategy and response plan, in mobilizing partners and leveraging resources, and also provides technical support and strategic guidance in the development of standard operating procedures adapted to the country for detecting cases, treatment, contacts tracing, alert systems, the development of a supply plan (including drugs, consumables and equipment), the use of protective materials for front-line workers and for prevention and control.

UNICEF plans in the coming weeks to expand these structures both in Niamey and in regions - to reach a total of 170 additional beds.

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UNICEF supports the Government in care and surveillance, by facilitating alert mechanisms for people who present alarming symptoms, supporting the preparation of the community for the investigation of cases, monitoring the contact of people, supporting the isolation process, and managing and treating cases - including those who do not require hospital care.

Alongside the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF co-directs risk communication and community engagement actions in order to raise awareness and encourage the population to adopt barrier gestures that help contain the spread of the virus. In addition to the national campaign waged through traditional and new media - including digital and community media, UNICEF is carrying out a series of actions at the community level by mobilizing town criers and social mobilizers, traditional and religious leaders, and youth. A large part of our actions is directed towards communities in the area of infection prevention and control, support is focused on setting up handwashing facilities and the necessary supplies in health centers and other at-risk areas - both in Niamey and in the interior of the country. UNICEF supports the regular disinfection of health centers, isolation and treatment centers, public infrastructures at risk of infection, and supports compliance with the measures for the safe and dignified burial of patients who have died from COVID-19.

UNICEF has started training hundreds of health workers and hygienists on infection and prevention control, aiming at ensuring the safety of health personnel and health service users and reducing the risks of infections at health facilities level.

We are providing additional support to ensure the access to basic social and health services - continued care: primary health care for killer diseases, immunization, basic nutrition support, education and protection, social protection and psychosocial support to affected populations, especially women and children.

According to UNICEF, what is the greatest impact of COVID-19 on the present and future of children in countries like Niger?

The crisis is putting essential services under pressure. These are services which secure the health, education and protection of our children. The most vulnerable children are now facing even greater risks and may be cut off from existing support.

Children in need of basic essential services are at risk of not receiving them. Children could face disruptions in primary care because health facilities are overwhelmed, or families are afraid to seek care due to fear of infection.

Government had to temporarily postpone preventive mass vaccination campaigns and other community-based services in the country to ensure that the delivery of such services does not contribute to COVID-19 spread, and to follow recommendations on physical distancing.

"I am confident with all the care arrangements you set up at the hospital. We are not going to give up. On my behalf, please encourage all the health personnel in this noble fight. We are looking at the situation through their eyes" HE Mr. Brigi Rafini, Prime Minister, when visiting the treatment center in Niamey.

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Likewise, the nutrition situation of children under five is expected to deteriorate with the current Covid-19 crisis.

Extensive school closures are now affecting all the students across the country.

Livelihoods are being threatened or lost, and parents are struggling to make ends meet. These conditions could push families to turn to negative coping mechanisms like child marriage or gender-based violence. Indeed, school closure alone implies additional protection risks for children.

We are deeply worried about the next phases of the crisis and the risk of it hitting harder some of the most vulnerable children and families. The COVID-19 crisis is a child rights crisis. Extra efforts should be made to protect those most vulnerable. We will not be safe until the hardest to reach are safe too.

Can you provide some examples on how the Covid-19 has impacted on children’s social services?

In the nutrition sector, UNICEF estimates that the number of children suffering from severe acute malnutrition will increase by 30% in Niger this year due to the impact of Covid-19 on the food security situation as well as on access of children and their mothers to appropriate care and basic health services. To this end, UNICEF is reinforcing capacities to respond to a possible surge in admissions for SAM and reduce mortality. UNICEF is also putting in place actions to protect the diets and nutrition services and practices of pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers during this critical period.

On child health, with the arrival of COVID-19 a decrease in attendance at health facilities has been noted. Children face disruptions in primary care because families are afraid to seek care due to fear of infection. Around 19% of confirmed cases are among health workers, affecting the treatment capacity in health structures for Covid-19 and non-covid-19 diseases. The country has postponed mass immunization campaigns to ensure that the delivery of immunization services does not contribute to COVID-19 spread.

In the area of child protection, border closures and other COVID-19 containment measures have put specific vulnerable groups more at risk, such as children living in the street or children from religious schools, who have been forcibly relocated with often little preparation. Due to COVID-19 economic and physical restrictions and impact on household income and security, gender-based violence has a worrying upward trend with a significant increase in March.

On education, the closure of schools has affected 3.7 million children, from pre-primary to secondary education. School closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic present an unprecedented risk to children’s education, protection and wellbeing. And it’s the most marginalized children who are the hardest hit by school closures. We know from previous crises that the longer vulnerable children are out of school, the less likely they are to return.
Niger reported two new cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus early this year. How has Covid-19 impacted on immunization services in Niger?

The Government had to temporarily postpone preventive mass vaccination campaigns to ensure that the delivery of immunization services does not contribute to Covid-19 spread, and to follow recommendations on physical distancing.

The country has reported two new cases of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus. The two new cases of cVDPV occurred in new areas (Niamey and Tillabery), which were not covered by previous subnational immunization days in 2019 and therefore not directly linked to the COVID-19-related suspension of vaccination campaigns (dates of onset of paralysis for the two polio cases were February 15 and 16, 2020).

With the arrival of Covid-19 a decrease in attendance at health facilities has been noted but it is not yet affecting the offer and utilization of routine immunization services. However, we noted through data analysis that many children have been missed in first quarter 2020 (1 child out of 3 did not receive the first dose of Polio and the same did not complete the series and 1 out of 3 children is unvaccinated for measles).

As the response to Covid-19 continues, we need to act now to ensure essential health services, including routine immunizations, are protected during the pandemic. However, at the same time, we need to minimize the risk of further disease outbreaks and loss of life. This calls for adjusting the delivery of routine immunization services to ensure the safety of health workers, parents and children; strong supply chains and trained health workers; and increased communication on the safety of vaccination services in Covid-19 times.

How Covid-19 can further exacerbate the current humanitarian crises across Niger?

Before the pandemic, already 3 million people, more than half children in Niger - were in need of humanitarian assistance, amid the risks posed by insecurity, malnutrition, recurrent disease epidemics and outbreaks, cyclical floods, droughts and displacement.

Niger continues to face simultaneous emergencies that are stretching the capacities of humanitarian partners to respond adequately. The situation is exacerbated by instability in the region, including in neighboring countries, resulting in an influx of thousands of refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons and migrants, all needing access to basic social services and protection for survival.

The Covid-19 outbreak is creating significant additional pressure and exacerbating vulnerabilities in affected populations. Actions taken to contain the spread of the coronavirus have slowed down the delivery of humanitarian assistance and social services for children’s care and protection in the country. Movement restrictions have greatly impacted on humanitarian access and prevented lifesaving aid from reaching the most in need. Also, humanitarian response is more expensive because of Covid-19 adaptation.

Now more than ever, it is the time for global solidarity. The costs of the pandemic for children are immediate and, if unaddressed, may persist throughout their lives.
As the current coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) continues to spread, UNICEF is working with the Government of Niger and its partners to respond to this health emergency and stem the spread of the virus. As of May 19, 2020, the country has 909 confirmed positive cases - including 55 deaths.

UNICEF supports the Government in care and surveillance, by facilitating alert mechanisms for people who present alarming symptoms, supporting the preparation of the community for the investigation of cases, monitoring the contact of people, supporting the isolation process, and managing and treating cases - including those who do not require hospital care.

Alongside the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF co-directs risk communication and community engagement actions in order to raise awareness and encourage the population to adopt barrier gestures that help contain the spread of the virus.

In addition to the national campaign waged through traditional and new media, UNICEF is carrying out a series of actions at the community level by mobilizing town criers and social mobilizers, traditional and religious leaders, and youth.

“The community is at the heart of this fight. The virus does not circulate on its own, it is the human who makes it circulate. To stem the transmission of this virus, it is therefore crucial to enforce barrier gestures and instructions for confinement and social distancing. If they are not respected, it will be difficult for us to stop the spread of the virus. It is for this reason that a large part of our actions is directed towards communities,” explained Dr. Félicité Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger.

In the area of infection prevention and control, support is focused on setting up handwashing facilities and the necessary supplies in health centers and other at-risk areas - both in Niamey and in the interior of the country.

UNICEF supports the regular disinfection of health centers, isolation and treatment centers, public infrastructures at risk of infection, and supports compliance with the measures for the safe and dignified burial of patients who have died from COVID-19. Water, hygiene and sanitation facilities have been set up in temporary structures, specially fitted out by UNICEF, to increase the triage and isolation amenities and consequently reinforce the capacities of health structures in Niger.

UNICEF also provides technical support in the development of standard operating procedures adapted to the country for detecting cases, caring for the sick, following up on contacts, setting up alert systems, the development of a supply plan (including drugs, consumables and equipment), protective materials for frontline workers, and materials for prevention and control.

“Children are at risk of being the hidden victims of this pandemic. We fear its short- and long-term effects on their health, well-being, development and prospects. It is for this reason that we continue to monitor the impact of the epidemic to support continuity of care, education and social services. We are also working to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the protection of children and women,” concluded Dr. Tchibindat.
HE Mr. Brigi Rafini, Prime Minister, Head of Government, visited the Covid-19 treatment system set up at the National Reference Hospital of Niamey and paid a special attention to the temporary health facilities installed by UNICEF, offering an additional capacity of 40 beds.

Equipped with a sorting center, these temporary structures aim to strengthen the capacity of the hospital for the treatment of people infected with the virus and are equipped with the necessary medical equipment, including the provision of oxygen concentrators. Health personnel were also trained on sorting and treatment protocols and are equipped with personal protective equipment (PPE).

“I am confident with all the care arrangements you set up at the hospital. We are not going to give up. On my behalf, please encourage all the health personnel in this noble fight. We are looking at the situation through their eyes” declared HE Mr. Brigi Rafini, Prime Minister, on this occasion.

The establishment of these temporary structures has also made it possible to decongest the hospital and thus guarantee the continuity of other health services.

“You are the frontline soldiers who are fighting against an invisible enemy.” said Dr. Félicité Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger. “We are behind you and will make your personal protection one of our main priorities.”

UNICEF, alongside other partners, has also reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the government to stem the transmission of the virus in Niger.

UNICEF is leading on preventative actions in communities across the country with risk communication and community engagement, providing hygiene and medical kits and monitoring the impact of the outbreak to support continuity of care, education and social services. UNICEF is also working to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on protection for children and women.

Covid-19, caused by a new coronavirus, has so far claimed more than 300,000 lives worldwide. In Niger, fifteen people died from the disease and 909 people tested positive as of May 19, 2020.

UNICEF plans in the coming days to expand these structures both in Niamey and in regions - to reach a total of 170 additional beds.

UNICEF took this opportunity to commend the commitment of health personnel - who, at the risk of their lives - are investing themselves daily to save other lives in the response to Covid-19.

“Thanks to these temporary centers, the treatment circuit was isolated and allowed us the continuity of other health services in complete safety” said the Doctor-Colonel, Oumara Mamane, Director General of the General Reference Hospital of Niamey.

UNICEF has started training 500 health workers and 200 hygienists on infection and prevention control, aiming at ensuring the safety of health personnel and health service users and reducing the risks of infections at health facilities level.

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HEALTH WORKERS AND HYGIENISTS TRAINED IN INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL

With the support of UNICEF, the National Committee against Covid-19, through the Infection Prevention and Control Commission, has started training 500 health workers and 200 hygienists on infection and prevention control, aiming at ensuring the safety of health personnel and health service users and reducing the risks of infections at health facilities level.

“This training should enable health workers to manage infection prevention and control measures to ensure there is no transmission to health staff or patients and users of health services,” said Armand Gnahore, UNICEF Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Program Manager.

“It is essential to reinforce the protection of health personnel to also preserve the continuity of other health services in complete safety.”

The training is alternated between theory and practice to allow practical assimilation and interaction between participants and trainers. The training modalities comply with physical distancing rules and take into account barrier gestures. The training includes cleaning and disinfection techniques in hospitals for hygienists.

In Niger, UNICEF is also strengthening drinking water storage capacities, access to sanitation infrastructure and hygiene supplies in isolation and treatment centers in Niamey and in regions.

UNICEF supports the regular disinfection of health centers, isolation and treatment centers, public infrastructures at risk of infection, and supports compliance with the measures for the safe and dignified burial of patients who have died from COVID-19.

UNICEF has started training 500 health workers and 200 hygienists on infection and prevention control, aiming at ensuring the safety of health personnel and health service users and reducing the risks of infections at health facilities level.
These are not easy days in Niamey. The arrival of COVID-19 has not been unnoticed in the capital's neighborhoods. Communities are mobilizing to face the spread of the virus. Neighborhood chiefs, traditional and religious leaders, and respected people in the communities are taking action to sensitize the population of Niamey.

Amirou Albade is 82 years old. Despite being at high-risk from COVID-19, he has no plans to stop his personal fight against the virus by respecting the prevention measures. We met him early in the morning under the scorching sun of Niamey while coordinating one of the awareness campaigns. Amirou is an institution in Niger. He is the President of the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger; one of the most respected positions in a country where the weight of socio-cultural norms is strongly felt. In Niger, social relations are very hierarchical, so traditional leaders are a fundamental catalyst to involve the community in the fight against COVID-19.

“We are mobilizing the maximum number of chiefs in the neighborhoods of Niamey. The message to the population is clear: there is no medicine against the virus, the only way we save lives now is following the preventive measures. These are times for solidarity, not division. Everyone individually and collectively must act to prevent community spread,” says Amirou, sheltered under the shade of the awning.

Amirou has stories to tell as a traditional chief. His career is well known throughout the country. He started in the Tillabery region, near the border with neighboring Burkina Faso. There he was the Chief of the Canton of Tagazar. Years later he became a Commander of the army and later was nominated president of the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger.

Community leaders will also use community radios, mosque speakers, towncriers and vehicles equipped with speakers as transmission channels for the transmission of community information prevention messages.

As part of the COVID-19 Diaries, UNICEF Niger accompanies the President of the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger during a sensitization campaign in Niamey.

TRADITIONAL LEADERS
THE VIRUS IS REAL

There is no medicine against the virus, the only way we save lives now is following the preventive measures. These are times for solidarity, not division.

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“We are also encouraging our brothers and sisters to pray but to do it at home. We tell them to avoid grouping in mosques and prayer rooms – to stay home. In these times we pray, hoping that God will protect the people of Niger,” he says. “It is important for the population to understand that small actions such as social distance and handwashing can save lives. We ask all the imams and religious leaders to help us in raising awareness.”

The traditional chiefs are considered as the guardians of Niger’s traditions and customs. As such, they are essential partners for behavior change in Niger. They receive unfailing respect from the administration and communities.

Traditional leaders like Amirou have administrative authority at the community level and work closely with religious leaders. These two groups are the most respected in both households and communities.

Therefore, in COVID-19 times, they play an essential role in sensitizing communities. They inspire other leaders to take action, spread the message, and help contain the pandemic. This is why UNICEF works with the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger (ACTN) to support communities in the fight against COVID-19 and its harmful effects.

The partnership aims to raise awareness in communities and set up mechanisms for health monitoring and mitigation of the effects of the crisis.

As of May 19, 2020, the country has had 909 confirmed positive cases – including 55 deaths. The first case in Niger was reported on March 19, 2020, in Niamey. All the regions are affected. However, the hotspot remains Niamey with more than 90 percent of cases.

Across the country, 12,728 villages and neighborhoods will be sensitized by awareness-raising and social mobilization activities under the leadership of traditional and religious leaders.

In addition to the national campaign waged through traditional and new media – including community media, UNICEF is carrying out a series of actions at the community level by mobilizing town criers and social mobilizers, traditional and religious leaders, and youth.

Small actions such as social distance and handwashing can save lives. We ask all the imams and religious leaders to help us in raising awareness.
Thanks to a collaboration between Facebook Inc., the Ministry of Public Health, ANSI and UNICEF, Niger officially launched a “chatbot” on the Whatsapp social network, to provide users accurate and timely information on the situation of Covid-19 in Niger and answer any Covid-19 queries.

“The new service, which is free to use, has been designed to answer questions from the public about Coronavirus, and to give prompt, reliable and official information 24 hours a day. It will help us to combat rumors and provide the public with reliable and credible information and practical advice to protect them from the virus,” said Dr. Idi Illassou Maïnassara, Minister of Public Health in Niger.

This chatbot offers a wealth of information to users - including practical advice on how to protect yourself from coronavirus, answers to frequently asked questions, directions for verifying the facts and stopping rumors, practical advice for travelers, as well as any other questions that users want to raise. Several doctors and communicators have been made available to respond directly to any queries.

To use the service, WhatsApp users can save the number (+227 80 06 60 30) to their phone contacts, then text whatever words in a WhatsApp message to begin. The bot will then respond via a series of prompts, covering key queries and information - and dispelling some of the rumors and misinformation around the outbreak which have been spreading via social and messaging apps.

“We are pleased to be able to provide the Niger Ministry of Health with communication tools that will help answer citizens’ questions on Covid-19 and make reliable and credible health advice easily accessible,” said Balkissa Idé Siddo, Facebook Inc. Public Affairs Manager for French-speaking Africa.

Access to information and communication technologies has seen significant growth in Niger in recent years. Almost half of the population has access to mobile phone and the country has more than 490,000 active users on social networks, according the Global Web Index 2020.

“Along with other partners, UNICEF continues to explore innovative ways to widen the scope of prevention messages on the Covid-19 and to provide as many people as possible with the necessary information and knowledge to help them protect themselves from the virus” said Dr. Félicité Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger.

To support the Ministry of Public Health efforts, UNICEF also collaborates with the National Information Society Agency (ANSI) for the provision, management and moderation of the green line 701 and the dedicated website www.coronavirus.nel, which is now the reference site on the situation of Covid-19 in the country.
UNICEF AND AIRTEL AFRICA ANNOUNCE PARTNERSHIP TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AFFECTED BY COVID-19

As millions of children are affected by school closures due to COVID-19, Airtel Africa will help provide access to online learning and better enable cash transfers for children and their families in sub-Saharan Africa.

UNICEF announced a new partnership with Airtel Africa aimed at providing children with access to remote learning and enable access to cash assistance for their families via mobile cash transfers. Under this partnership, UNICEF and Airtel Africa will use mobile technology to benefit an estimated 133 million school age children currently affected by school closures in 13 countries across sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The adverse effects of school closures on children’s learning are well documented. Education experts warn that gains made in increasing access to learning in the previous decade are at risk of being lost, or even reversed completely. And for poor households around the world, the pandemic means a reduced or total loss of income due to the movement restrictions in place. Remote learning, supported by digital tools, is a core part of UNICEF’s response to ensure continuity of learning for those children with access to technology at home. Airtel Africa will zero-rate select websites hosting educational content, which will provide children with remote access to digital content at no cost.

“COVID-19 is affecting access to information and education at an unprecedented scale,” said Fayaz King, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for Field Results and Innovation. “Worldwide, most children are not in school, which we know can lead to a number of increased vulnerabilities and setbacks. UNICEF is partnering with Airtel Africa to deliver better outcomes for children and families affected by widespread closures.”

The partnership will also provide UNICEF with a means to facilitate vital cash assistance to alleviate financial barriers for some of the most vulnerable families across the region, including many affected by the growing socio-economic hardships resulting from suspension of income earning activities. This will help ensure families have additional resources to cope with the ongoing health and economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Some effective ways to cushion families from the effects of this crisis is through providing free Internet access to selected educational websites to help children keep up with their learning during the school closures and direct cash transfer programmes to reduce physical presence requirements for cash in hand exchanges,” said Raghunath Mandava, Airtel Africa Chief Executive Officer. “Alongside various other COVID-19 related initiatives and support that we are providing to Governments and the community, we are glad to also collaborate with UNICEF to support children.”

The partnership with Airtel Africa supports UNICEF’s Global Agenda for Action for Children. The plan outlines global actions which private and public sector partners can take to keep millions of girls and boys – including those who have been uprooted by conflict, children living with disabilities, and girls at risk of violence – healthy, safe and learning.

UNICEF and Airtel Africa’s partnership aims to benefit children and families in 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

COVID-19 is affecting access to information and education at an unprecedented scale. Worldwide, most children are not in school, which we know can lead to a number of increased vulnerabilities and setbacks. UNICEF is partnering with Airtel Africa to deliver better outcomes for children and families affected by widespread closures.
"We want our country free of Covid-19 and we know we can help" – these were the words of the winning teams of the Niger National Hackathon Hack4Youth, supported by UNICEF. Organized in 2019, the Hackathon aimed to encourage young innovators to develop solutions for digital youth engagement.

Covid-19 brings to Niger a lot of challenges: access to information for most vulnerable, engagement of all and everyone, lack of alerting mechanisms. To address these, young innovators worked day and night to launch the youth engagement platform http://muryarmatassa.org/public


“Young people represent almost two-thirds of Niger population and if at least one young person per village will be engaged in fighting Covid-19, 20,000 girls and boys will spread the word about protection measures, symptoms, collecting in the same time alert cases to be reported to the health system. For our youth engagement platform we have chosen the name Muryar Matassa (Voice of Youth in Hausa) and, after several weeks of hard work, we are ready to launch it”, Jamilou Idi Saadou, one of the members of the innovation team, said.

The web platform and its mobile application will be used by young people to get information, share concerns and report alerts of Covid-19.

“As young people, we have a social responsibility to protect those at risk, but also to help health authorities to collect information about potential cases, so that they can act accordingly. An innovation for the country and the region, Muryar Matassa is needed now more than ever and our whole team is ready to support its activities” said Adama Boubacar, a young innovator involved in the development and maintenance of the platform.

Even in a country like Niger, with a low internet penetration, young people are more and more engaged in digital activities, being present on social networks and mediating the access to useful information for their parents and grandparents.

“Young people have a great force in Niger, they are bringing change and progress and they are inspiring others for good deeds. UNICEF has dedicated a whole pillar in its strategy to involve youth and encourage them to become models and change multipliers in their communities and in the society. I trust their enthusiasm and innovation. Muryar Matassa will put young people in the center of social mobilization efforts to fight Covid-19,” mentions Dr. Felicite Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger.
YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE ARCHITECTS FOR A CHANGE AGAINST COVID-19

COVID Diaries with Assamaou Mayaki, Adolescent & Youth Development Officer at UNICEF Niger

The youth’s commitment is essential also for the prevention of COVID-19 in our country. This is why we work, in support the government the youth networks on the ground. For example, in order to fight against the spread of fake news, it must be carried out simultaneously at different levels, in particular through the involvement of children, young people and influencers.

2/3 of the Nigerien are young, and we cannot and should not initiate anything meaningful without them. Most importantly these youth realize the great role that they should play in this pandemic. Its was important to ensure youth-to-youth language to contribute to stop the spread of the disease.

Has your work been affected by COVID-19? If yes, how? And the Youth?

Yes. Living in a pandemic testes our capacity of rapidly adjusting to change - change in the way with work and making resources available to partners, and most importantly changes in the way we interact with young people. Everything is online and often the internet doesn’t collaborate. For the youth, things are running slowly or closing.

Could you describe your motivations and the reasons which push you to continue to multiply the efforts in favor of children - and this despite the difficult context? Why is it important to maintain our operations for the well-being of children and families?

We owe it to youth that are already out there with and without us in the aim to bringing changes and good health to children, and the population at large. Together we can do so much, so it’s very important that we are there to cheer the ones that are making a difference without us and empower the ones that need a little push to get engaged and that regardless of the context.

Do you want to share another element about your work these days on the front line in Niamey? your daily experience, your motivations, your interactions with affected people, your worries if you have any?

Youth are the real MVPs (Most Valuable Players). From sleepless nights in designing and deploying digital solutions to engage their peers to spending the day under 45+C to sensitize the population.

What is your job at UNICEF in Niger? Since When? In a few words, what does your job consist of?

I am an Adolescent & Youth Development Officer at the Niamey office since 2017. In general terms my y role consists in empowering adolescents and the youth across Niger, so they are ready to seize opportunities make a change in their communities.

Can you tell us about your experience with UNICEF during COVID-19? How was it?

Since Niger registered its first case in March 2020, we have been working relentlessly with various youth movement to bring along answers that other youth may want and need, and also finding solutions to engage them in the fight against Covid. Lots of initiatives with the youth have been set up in the communities as the cases increase in Niamey, Zinder and Agadez.

In Niger, the dynamism of young people, who represent the majority of the population, is a precious asset. Young people in our country are increasingly engaged and ready to take the initiative to design and implement creative and innovative solutions. For example, young people in Niger are carrying out a vast awareness campaign on coronavirus and promoting the muryamattassa.org platform.

The youth is a key part of the solution. They are the architects of change. My role is to ensure that they have the capacity to do so, and the government must encourage and support them.

Why do you think the youth plays a crucial role against COVID-19?

The youth’s commitment is essential also for the prevention of COVID-19 in our country. This is why we work, in support the government the youth networks on the ground. For example, in order to fight against the spread of fake news, it must be carried out simultaneously at different levels, in particular through the involvement of children, young people and influencers.

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Amidst the ongoing concerns related to coronavirus, a team of comedians spread awareness about the COVID-19 in Niger. In a series of video posted on social media, they are seen talking about the measures that should be taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

One of top national comedy influencers Wanousky Montana produces a series of comedy short movies to sensitize in a fun and creative way the population on the preventive measures against the virus.

“As influencers, we have a social obligation to show support to people who are suffering from this crisis, we want to deliver hopeful messages” he says.

“Comedy plays an important societal role when we are working through dire, complex social problems. For many people, the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus is the hardest thing to handle. We don’t know how exactly we’ll be impacted or how bad things might get.”

“When anxiety rises because we’re facing a distressing threat like the new coronavirus, we need to focus on what tends to work for us to ease anxiety, and humour can help. Laughter is a symbol of hope” he says.

In a low-internet penetration country like Niger, his videos have reached almost 100,000 views within a few days. With UNICEF support, a new series were aired on social media not only to help the population cope with social anxiety but also to encourage them to adopt the preventive measures. Much of this “coronavirus comedy” is functionally reminding us what to do – wash our hands, stay home, and practice social distancing.

“Comedy serves crucial cultural functions as we deal with tough challenges: sharing and amplifying messages, addressing difficult topics in accessible ways, and inspiring us to feel emotions of hope and optimism, which motivate us to engage in social problems. And, not least, comedy helps us to bolster individual and collective resilience we need to face the pandemic” explains Dr. Félicité Tchibindat, UNICEF Representative in Niger.

UNICEF is actively taking steps to provide accurate information about the virus and working with our partners to address the spread of the virus. UNICEF is leading on preventative actions in communities across the country with risk communication and community engagement, providing handwashing supplies, hygiene and medical kits, strengthening health system capacities and monitoring the impact of the outbreak to support continuity of care, education and social services. UNICEF is also working to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on protection for children and women.

COVID-19: USING HUMOUR TO COPE WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY

A team of comedians unite to spread awareness on coronavirus in Niger

Comedy plays an important societal role when we are working through dire, complex social problems. For many people, the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus is the hardest thing to handle. We don’t know how exactly we’ll be impacted or how bad things might get.
Growing violence and insecurity are threatening the care and protection of approximately 2.3 million children in need of protection assistance in 2020 in the Central Sahel region – across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – up from almost 1.2 million children in 2019. At the same time, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are among the countries most affected by COVID-19 in Africa. As the pandemic spreads across the region, violence against children continues to rise.

In Burkina Faso, the number of children in need of protection assistance has increased more than ten-fold from 35,800 children in 2019 to 368,000 in 2020. In Mali, over one million children face protection issues this year, twice as many as compared to last year. Whereas, over 867,000 children in Niger need protection assistance in 2020, 200,000 more than in 2019.

“The COVID-19 pandemic adds further risks to the rights and safety of millions of children already trapped in one or more humanitarian crises in the Central Sahel region,” said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa. “In a context of high levels of insecurity, children have been victims of abuse and violence, sexual or economic exploitation, trafficking, child marriage, and many have been forcibly separated from their families or recruited into armed groups.”

COVID-19 is making the critical situation for children in the Central Sahel – particularly girls, displaced children and those living in the street – even worse. Schools have been closed across all three countries to limit the spread of the coronavirus, affecting the education of approximately 12 million children temporarily out of school. Prior to COVID-19, over 8 million children, 6-14 years were already out of school in the region. When children are not in school, they are at greater risk of recruitment by armed groups, sexual and gender-based violence, child labour and other forms of exploitation and abuse.

In Niger, COVID-19 containment measures have rendered specific vulnerable groups such as children living in the street or children attending koranic schools even more at risk. Approximately 7,400 Almajiri children were returned from Nigeria to Niger due to the closures of koranic schools, and 375 unaccompanied migrant children (including 107 girls) were repatriated from Libya and Algeria between January and April. An additional 7,015 talibé children were identified as being vulnerable and in need of support in Niamey, the hotbed of the pandemic in Niger. There, due to COVID-19 economic and physical restrictions and impact on household income and security, gender-based violence has become a worrying trend with a significant increase in March, and more children victims.

“Actions taken to contain the spread of the coronavirus have slowed down the delivery of humanitarian assistance and social services for children’s care and protection in the Central Sahel. Meanwhile, the insecurity has not stopped, and children continue to pay a high price,” said Ms. Poirier. “Now more than ever is the time for global solidarity. At the same time that governments and humanitarian partners work together to protect children from the health impact of COVID-19, we must also continue to protect the most vulnerable children from violence, exploitation and abuse, making our programmes ‘COVID-proof’.”

UNICEF calls on governments to invest in child protection services and social welfare workforce as essential pillars of the COVID-19 response, and to strengthen national protection systems, referral mechanisms for gender-based violence, and the provision of psychosocial support – especially for children in conflict-affected contexts.

Together with partners, UNICEF works to ensure the continuation of child protection services, for example by supporting countries establish safe, accessible channels to report on violence, neglect and abuse against children, as well as inform children, youth and their communities on their rights and available protection measures.

In Niger, UNICEF worked with the Government in identifying children living in the street and itinerant talibés and supporting their return and reintegration in their communities.

UNICEF has increased its appeal for children in the Central Sahel region to US $ 268 million to provide relief to COVID-19 affected and at-risk populations while continuing to assist children and their families with protection, education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation services. As of April 2020, the response plans remain 79 per cent underfunded in Burkina Faso, 76 per cent in Mali, and 71 per cent in Niger.
Thank You!

UNICEF is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. UNICEF would not be able to deliver critical response to the Covid-19 pandemic without the sustained commitment, efforts, and the generous contributions received from committed partners. We thank all our funding partners for their support and look forward to continued collaboration to ensure a better future for all children in Niger.