

Supporting children's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNICEF-WFP partnership on school health and nutrition

In response to the impact of COVID-19, the partnership between UNICEF and WFP on school health and nutrition is being scaled up. As of 20 April 2020, 1.6 billion learners in 199 countries -representing 91% of the total number of enrolled learners - have been directly affected by school closures. This does not only impact children's ability to learn, but also their access to a range of health, nutrition and protection services offered in and through schools.

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During a pandemic like COVID-19, extreme hunger and poverty rates can increase sharply. WFP and UNICEF's main concern are the people living on the edge in fragile countries – women, men, girls and boys already facing extreme malnutrition, conflict and disease. It's vital that at this time of global crisis programmes which offer a lifeline to vulnerable people around the world get scaled up. Almost 370 million children are missing out on school meals because of school closures. A key lesson from school closures during the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa was that the impact was on both children's academic performance and on their overall health and well-being.

While governments, international agencies, civil society and other partners come together to mobilize alternate learning options at scale, similar efforts are required to protect the health and nutrition outcomes of children. The WFP-UNICEF partnership on school health and nutrition announced earlier this year offers an established framework and programme of cooperation to ensure that millions of vulnerable school aged children especially in fragile contexts receive the health and nutrition support they need to learn and to thrive.

The current programme of action is focused on two dimensions: i) partnership and coalition building; and ii) operational action, with a global, bold and ambitious ask by 2030 and a more operational target for 2020 for six initial countries in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Aligned to these, the partnership will now adopt a two-pronged strategy to respond to the immediate and medium-term needs of learners and education systems during and after COVID-19:

1. Interventions during school closures: UNICEF and WFP with the support of other partners will focus on the following [based on respective comparative advantages and operational capacity]:

- Track the number of countries and learners missing out on school feeding to understand the scale of the challenge;
- Identify a mix of alternate mechanisms to provide meals to school-aged children [e.g., through vouchers, cash transfers, family pick up points etc.]. This will also leverage other partnerships to facilitate comprehensive support to the family (social protection/nutrition, health and food support), especially for vulnerable families;
- Support health education/promotion on health, nutrition and WASH through modified education provision mechanisms [no tech, low tech and high-tech options]; and
- Implement a knowledge management strategy and research agenda to document case studies of good practice, lesson learnt etc.

2. A joint Back-to-School campaign: Based on prior experience of epidemics [such as during the Ebola crisis], it is highly likely that there will be a significant setback in the health and nutrition status of learners upon return to school. For effective learning to take place, this must be an immediate priority of schools and education systems. In anticipation of this, WFP and UNICEF will begin planning for the re-opening of schools by governments to offer comprehensive support to the health and nutrition status of learners. Current operations will be relooked in terms of scope, depth, reach and adequacy and will inform a strengthened advocacy, resource mobilization and partnership drive to meet these needs.

It is well known that following periods of prolonged absence from school, vulnerable children are less likely to ever return. School meals and other health and social services are often the determining factor as to whether families send their children to school or not. After a crisis of this magnitude with far reaching health, education, social and economic impact, implementing measures that not only expand the reach of health and nutrition services but improve its quality becomes critical. UNICEF and WFP will build upon the 'back-to-school campaigns to accelerate system-wide reforms in this regard and calls on its partners and donors to join them in this cross-sectoral global effort.

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