The United Nations & COVID-19 Global Health Emergency - April 28 Update

Secretary-General Guterres stated, “COVID-19 is the greatest test” since World War II; “it is more than a health crisis. It is a human crisis.” The UN chief released a plan to counter COVID-19, which emphasizes the need for countries to act in concert and outlines ways to suppress transmission of the virus, safeguard people’s lives and their livelihoods, and learn from the crisis to build back.

Provided below is a snapshot of UN efforts overseas to combat COVID-19. This week’s edition includes information on the first COVID-19 case in a refugee camp, a new WFP humanitarian air hub in Addis Ababa, and IOM’s successful work ensuring migrants in Tunisia have access to free COVID-19 tests.

This reference document is by no means comprehensive of all the UN’s work; it is meant to illustrate the various ways the “UN Family” confronts a global pandemic, based on both its past actions and new methods. This document will be updated regularly but please reach out if you have any questions. For further background, the United Nations has also developed a resource to monitor the latest updates.

World Food Programme (WFP)

- WFP established an air hub in Addis Ababa to distribute vital medical supplies across Africa on behalf of the larger humanitarian community. A team of 25 WFP aviation and logistics staff are at the airport around the clock to manage the 24-hour operation. The first “UN solidarity flight” departed on April 14, carrying masks, aprons, face shields, gloves, goggles, gowns, and thermometers.

- WFP Executive Director David Beasley warned that COVID-19 could double the number of people facing food crises, especially where conflict has already caused profound hunger, and introduce “multiple famines of biblical proportions within a short few months.” You can see his remarks to the UN Security Council, presented on April 21, here.

- WFP and others in the Global Network Against Food Crises released the 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, which identified the highest level of acute food insecurity and malnutrition since the report’s first edition in 2017 and revealing new risks due to COVID-19.

UN Population Fund (UNFPA)

- UNFPA donated 18,000 medical masks to New York City to help it fight COVID-19 and support front-line health workers.

- The first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in South Sudan in April. South Sudan has one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world. When the country was first formed in 2008, it had 8 midwives. Now there are more than 800, 444 of which have been trained by UNFPA. Right now, UNFPA is working with the South Sudan Ministry of Health to put in place measures to ensure that maternal health services are safeguarded to prevent deaths and illnesses, especially among pregnant and breastfeeding women and their newborns. Measures are also being put in place to protect frontline health workers, including midwives. The plan includes recruiting additional midwives to support the anticipated surge in demand for health care.
UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

- This week, UNHCR highlighted the additional protection risks the pandemic poses for refugees and other displaced people, many of whom were living in vulnerable situations prior to the public health emergency.

- UNHCR is working to ensure that critical services for survivors of gender-based violence are designated as essential and are accessible to those in need. These include health and security services, psycho-social support services and safe shelters. Across operations, UNHCR is also distributing emergency cash assistance to support survivors and women-at-risk.

- UNHCR is working together with UNICEF to support the wellbeing of forcibly displaced children globally and address the specific protection challenges presented by the pandemic, including through exploring mechanisms for distance learning and increased cash assistance.

UNICEF

- This week UNICEF and Microsoft launched an expansion of their “Learning Passport” global learning platform. Initially designed to provide education for displaced and refugee children through a digital remote learning platform, the Learning Passport has undergone rapid expansion to facilitate country-level curriculum for children and youth whose schools have been forced to close due to COVID-19. The platform will also provide key resources to teachers and educators.

- UNICEF assisted with the drafting of the UN Secretary-General’s new policy brief on “The Impact of COVID-19 on Children,” which emphasized that the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, coupled with measures to stop the transmission of the virus, could have catastrophic consequences for the world’s children. The policy brief offers a series of immediate and sustained actions for governments and policy makers relating to social protection, continuity of child-centered services, and support for caregivers.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

- In Tunisia, IOM’s advocacy successfully resulted in the inclusion of migrants in the national COVID-19 response, including the establishment of a multilingual hotline for migrants to access information, free testing for migrants, and the provision of other relevant services such as psychosocial support.

- IOM Uganda has supported the establishment and training of 18 community-based WASH management committees to manage the operation and maintenance of water points and to ensure social distancing, hand washing, and other COVID-19 response measures at key water points. IOM Guinea has set up a disease surveillance system at five border crossing points with Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia and Mali.

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, five points of control (POCs) are supported by IOM in Kinshasa. IOM has equipped frontline workers with personal protection equipment (PPE), health screening materials and tablets to support contact tracing, and has provided direct technical supervision at the POC sites in Gombe – Kinshasa. Between April 6-15, 178,848 travelers were screened at the five PoCs.
International Labour Organization (ILO)

- The ILO-IFC's Better Work program in Bangladesh worked together with other UN agencies and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Export Association to create a task force with interested buyers to support the production of level-1 PPE equipment in the country, both as a response to the immediate COVID-19 crisis and as a future investment in higher-level PPE production capacity in the long-term.

- In addition to gathering and sharing information on countries’ responses, including through the ILO’s Country Policy Responses Database, the ILO has developed a series of briefs on the impact, responses, and recommendations for specific economic sectors. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises are particularly vulnerable since they tend to have fewer assets and more limited cash reserves than larger enterprises, as well as lower levels of productivity.

- On April 16, the ILO published recommendations to support enterprises during the pandemic and recovery as well as a Checklist for the Prevention and Mitigation of COVID-19 in the workplace.

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

- The first COVID-19 case in a refugee camp in Lebanon was detected this week—a Palestine refugee from Syria. UNRWA is working together with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) on the completion of an isolation center for Palestine refugees, as separation in densely populated areas is near impossible.

- To help enforce social distancing and stay at home guidelines, UNRWA physically transported food baskets to 73,000 homes, about 4,000 individual homes per day.

- On April 21 alone, UNRWA managed 464 calls through its newly established telemedicine hotline. On the same day, UNRWA also delivered essential medicine to patients aged 70 or older and/or with diabetes to more than 644 individuals.

- All schools remain closed. During this closure, more than 166,200 parents have visited UNRWA’s Interactive Learning Program and 82,000 have accessed UNRWA’s self-learning materials.

UN Development Programme (UNDP)

- A UNDP-led COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility has already been launched, funded by existing resources and capitalized with an initial $20 million. This facility is disbursing through a fast-track mechanism enabling UNDP teams to offer immediate assistance to countries for their national response. UNDP anticipates a minimum $500 million need to support 100 countries.

- UNDP is already providing COVID-19 health systems support to countries including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Djibouti, El Salvador, Eritrea, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Nigeria, Paraguay, Panama, Serbia, Ukraine, and Vietnam. In Eritrea and Djibouti, for example, UNDP is helping secure life-supporting medical equipment, store medical supplies, and establish quarantine sites. In Serbia, with the European Union, UNDP is helping partners adapt disaster resilience projects to deliver much-needed medical supplies. In Niger, UNDP is working with the Economic Commission of Africa on the socio-economic impact and with the World Bank on private sector support to recovery.

- Globally, UNDP is helping the private sector respond, including through its Connecting Business Initiative guide for private sector engagement, developed with FAO, the Global Compact, IOM, OCHA, the UN Foundation, UN Women, WFP and WHO.