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**Ensuring children continue to learn even in the Ebola Crisis:**

**Proposed Provision of Open/Distance Learning for children**

**in affected countries**

**from September/October to December 2014**

**UNICEF WCARO**

1. **Background**

The outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in West Africa has affected six countries as of today, namely Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, DRC, Nigeria and Senegal. In Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the situation evolved rapidly and the outbreaks made an unprecedented impact on countries health and social services.

School closure is one such negative impact. With the Presidential order of 1 August 2014, all 4,413 primary schools in Liberia are closed and will not be opened until January 2015. In Sierra Leone, primary and secondary schools are closed until further notice. The Federal government of Nigeria also announced a one-month delay in starting the 2014/15 academic year, postponing the new school year to 13 October 2014.

If all these school-aged children do not have access to education opportunities for the first three months of the year or even more, this will deprive them of learning opportunities as well as the habit of going to school. Some children might not enrol even when school finally starts, and others may drop out. Furthermore, many children currently, because of the outbreaks, have no meaningful activities to occupy their time, nor (with schools often used as a makeshift health facilities) any safe place to learn. Discontinuity of education may place children’s protection and well-being at risk.

1. **Objectives**

The idea is for children to continue learning in some alternative and cost-effective way during the Ebola outbreak, in particular during the school closure period. If children continue learning, it will be easier for them to catch up once schools reopen. The activities will keep children engaged and stimulated, and provide them with basic numeracy and literacy as well as other useful knowledge and skills. Furthermore, this might even bring courage and hope to the parents and communities.

1. **Strategies**
2. *An interim measure*

Open/distance learning with the use of radio and learning materials would be relatively cost-effective. It should be clarified that in this context, open distance learning would not take the form of Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI), in which radio education programs are used to boost education quality in classroom settings, but rather focus on non-formal education activities through the use of radio targeting children in home-based settings. Therefore, radio education programs would not replace formal education activities and in parallel, measures to maintain the 2014/2015 school year despite a late start would need to be put in place by the Ministry of Education (in the form of a prolonged school year, condensed curriculum, catch-up classes, etc.).

However, a radio education program would provide an interim emergency measure to allow children to engage in non-formal structured activities to maintain basic numeracy and literacy, acquire relevant knowledge and skills to cope with the Ebola outbreaks, benefit from psychosocial support and as well foster social cohesion. To be successful, such an initiative will require a clear understanding of the purpose by all involved: Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and radio stations.

1. *Building on existing opportunities*

Radio stations to produce and air the education program will be identified based on availability of airtime, technical capacity, and reach. This could be Ministry of Education radio stations, community radio stations, or UN radio stations, with which collaboration could be established. A brief scoping on existing education / educational programs should be conducted to ensure that all existing materials and programs are being built upon, in order to avoid duplication and delays.

1. *Accompanying learning materials*

Due to time constraints, it may not be possible to develop textbooks and workbooks in line with the radio program. However, basic notebooks and pens could be distributed as well as learning materials such as the “Bouba and Zaza” children’s workbooks and stories developed by UNESCO and Clement Lafon Editions which are particularly suitable for the youngest age group.

1. **Content**

The initial target will be preschool and primary school-aged children. The programme will include the following contents:

1. **Messages for parents:** this will include guidance and tips for parents and care-givers so that they can allow and meaningfully engage their children in play and learning. At a minimum, parents should be encourage to set-aside a few hours per day for children to play and learn, and be informed about the radio education program. Advice on how older children can support their younger siblings could also be provided.
2. **Basic numeracy and literacy**: Three broadly grouped grade/age activities will be prepared, for grades 1&2, 3&4 and 5&6. This could be done in the form of revisions of last year’s curriculum, based on the assumption that children may have kept their textbooks / notebooks and will need some time to revise after the summer months. The pedagogical content would need to be developed in coordination with the MoE.

**Life-skills for hygiene education**: This will be a common programme for grades 1 to 6. The messages will be conveyed in the forms of talks by specialists, Q&A (use of mobile phone could be a possibility), relevant stories, etc. The issues will be discussed in a very common and simple language for children to understand the facts. This would also be useful for helping adults understand vital information.

1. **Psychosocial care, social cohesion and living together in the time of outbreaks:** This would also be a common programme for grades 1 to 6 to provide psychosocial support through the programmes and foster social cohesion among children and communities they are in. Storytelling, songs, and games will be aired for this purpose. Stories used in the curriculum could be used if they exist.

A complementary note with resources that could be used to develop the content of the radio education program will be shared shortly.

**Innovations in the open/distance learning**

**“Educ-Entertainment”:** life skills, psychosocial care, social cohesion could be conveyed through entertaining songs, music, poems or story-telling. This could be later developed into listeners’ participation.

**Facilitators**: where possible, teachers can be encouraged to support this radio learning. They can be invited to talk over the radio, help children with workbooks, and to answer questions and correct children’s work. Parents and other community members can also contribute to the programmes in different ways.

**Flexibilities and inclusiveness**: The advantage of open/distance learning is for children to learn at home or wherever is convenient and safe for children. They can have a study group if they like and if children groups are possible. Children can listen to the level they like. Some children might prefer to do the work prepared for lower grades than their own, and there would be no stigma. Children who might not have enrolled in school can also join and start from the first grades. The programme will provides opportunities and flexibility for children to learn.

Based on the availability of airtime, specific schedules can be developed to incorporate these various elements. In the interest of time and to respond to the emergency needs created by the EVD epidemic, it will be better to “start small” and make progressive improvements on the program as needed and possible.