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PRESS RELEASE

HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES ACT IN ANTICIPATION OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN CAMEROON

Work is beginning to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 to almost 140,000 refugees and nearby communities in Cameroon.

The projects have been enabled by the Migration Emergency Response Fund (MERF), which has released funding, following a crisis alert on 20 March. The 'anticipation alert' was raised as aid agencies were concerned that refugee camps are particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 due to overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to health services, underlying individual vulnerabilities, and the potential to be overlooked in national response plans. It was agreed that early action is needed to prevent the spread of the disease, but up to that point, the funds needed to prepare were unavailable. As of 6 April, Cameroon has 658 confirmed cases, nine deaths and 17 recoveries of COVID-19 within its borders.

Three agencies—International Medical Corps, Plan International and Solidarités International—have been awarded £300,000 to carry out various activities, including training of health personnel and community leaders, raising awareness of good hygiene practices, the installation of handwashing stations, and the distribution of WASH kits. The projects, which began on 27 March, will last three months and work in close coordination with the Ministry of Health, WHO, and other relevant actors.

Christina Bennett, CEO of the Start Network said:

"Start Network is well-positioned to respond to the current and emerging humanitarian challenge associated with COVID-19. We harness the capacity of over 50 NGOs, distributing over US\$10 billion in relief and development programmes to hundreds of millions of people every year. Many of our members have demonstrated expertise in the prevention and control of the spread of infectious diseases in different countries across the globe, and past Start Fund responses to outbreaks such as Ebola have illustrated this."

Miriam Castaneda, Country Director of Plan International Cameroon said:

"The increasing trends in confirmed cases in one month, signal that the pandemic is rapidly extending to other parts of the country. Based on this, we have developed an Emergency Response Plan to support the Government of Cameroon and Cameroonians at the community level in controlling the spread. We have received funding from the Start Network for the prevention and control of the pandemic in four refugee sites and host communities in

the East Region. The implementation of the project started on 27 March through strategic meetings with the Regional Delegate of Health. In the coming days, our team will begin implementing awareness-raising activities, distribution of handwashing kits, and training of health personnel and community health workers on the management of the pandemic.”

Rebecca Bouchet-Petersen, Head of Mission at Solidarités International said:

“In view of the difficulties in accessing health services, the weakness of existing structures and underlying individual vulnerabilities, the Central African refugees in the camps in the Est and Adamoua regions would face a sudden and significant increase in humanitarian needs if a COVID-19 epidemic was to spread. With the support of the Start Network, Solidarités International will be able to deploy a massive prevention intervention in three crowded camps through awareness campaigns on barrier gestures, improve the access to hand washing capacities and support the local surveillance. In this context, it is crucial for humanitarian actors to have access to flexible and rapid funding such as the Start Fund.”

Lutful Kabir, Country Director of International Medical Corps in Cameroon said:

“As an organisation that has served conflict-affected communities for more than 35 years and with a long history of fighting infectious diseases, International Medical Corps is thrilled to have been awarded funding from the Start Network for our COVID-19 response in Cameroon. The funding will support men, women and children in the country who—long before the added hardship of COVID-19—faced extreme challenges, including access to good hygiene services, which are key to preventing the spread of infectious diseases such as COVID-19.”

Start Network has also launched a new COVID-19 aid fund to anticipate and respond to critical virus-related humanitarian needs in low-income countries. The fund was kickstarted with a donation from IKEA Foundation for €1.5M and other donors are being sought. Known as Start Fund COVID-19, it is part of the Start Network’s existing funding mechanism, the Start Fund, which has enabled the network to get the fund set up quickly. It will also ensure that existing mechanisms like the MERF can continue to provide a rapid response to changes in needs along the migration route.

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Notes to Editors

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Start Network: www.startnetwork.org @startnetwork | Start Network is made up of more than 50 national and international aid agencies from five continents. Its aim is to transform humanitarian action through innovation, fast funding, early action and localisation.