

Building momentum for routine immunization recovery in Africa

Context

At the 2012 World Health Assembly (WHA), all 194 Member States – including those in the African region – endorsed [the Global Vaccine Action Plan](#) (GVAP) and committed to obtaining 90% national immunization coverage by 2020. To achieve this, the African region adopted the [Regional Strategic Plan for Immunization](#) (RSPI), which sets ambitious targets, including eradicating polio and eliminating measles, rubella and maternal & neonatal tetanus by 2020. [The 2016 Addis Ababa Declaration on Immunization](#) – a historic pledge endorsed by Heads of State at the 28th African Union Summit, further aimed to increase political will to achieve these global and regional goals. Subsequently, in February 2016, Ministers from 45 Member States attended the Ministerial Conference on Immunization in Africa, organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and made a commitment to continue to invest in immunization programs. This declaration included the dedication to increase resources and the need to negotiate with manufacturers to provide vaccines at a reasonable price and improve price transparency – all to strengthen immunization programs.

Routine childhood vaccination was among the essential health services disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the world saw the worst continued decline in routine immunization in 30 years. Within the African continent this has led to increasing outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases. For example, 18 countries in the African region have reported a measles outbreak in 2022, including 5 out of the 9 priority countries¹. New polio cases have not only re-emerged in African countries² that had not experienced the virus in decades but has also crossed borders to the United Kingdom, the United States and Israel; sending a message that neglecting routine immunization puts children and communities everywhere at risk of epidemics of vaccine-preventable diseases.

The unprecedented pressure on immunization supply chains, primary health care (PHC) systems, health workforces, and national budgets, due to the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the backsliding in immunization rates in 20 countries that now contain three-quarters of the world's zero-dose children. Among these countries are nine from the African region: **Nigeria, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Cameroon, Angola, Madagascar, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania**. In 2021, these nine countries accounted for 43% of zero-dose children recorded in the 20 priority countries (6.1 million out of 14.2 million), and for 79% of zero-dose children in the African region. This is a child crisis which could translate in high child morbidity and mortality across Africa; and the globe.

¹ Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and United Republic of Tanzania

² Detection of wild polio virus 1 (WPV1) in Malawi and Mozambique and an increase of cases of polio variants in 2022

Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world of the power of vaccines to fight disease, save lives, and create a healthier, safer, and more prosperous future. Despite this knowledge, the benefits of immunization are unevenly shared: coverage varies widely among and within countries. Some populations – often the poorest, the most marginalized and the most vulnerable, in fragile, conflict-torn settings – have poor access to immunization services. Each year, 20 million infants do not receive a full course of even basic vaccines, and many more miss out on newer vaccines. Of these, over 13 million receive no vaccines through immunization programmes – the “zero dose” children. The cumulative total number of children who have missed even one dose of routine vaccines in the past 3 years is estimated at over 50 million globally including over 21 million in the African region. It is further estimated that immunization coverage will not return to 2019 levels until 2027 without renewed political will and immediate, intensified efforts. Without urgent collaborative action and programme adaptations, vaccine-preventable diseases will continue to claim too many young lives.

Moving forward, strong immunization systems will be needed to ensure that people everywhere are protected against COVID-19 and other diseases. The World Health Assembly, with the support of countries and partners, has endorsed a new global vision and strategy, called the [Immunization Agenda 2030 \(IA2030\)](#), to address these challenges over the next decade and save over 50 million lives. IA2030 envisions a world where everyone, everywhere, at every age, fully benefits from vaccines to improve health and well-being. It aims to maintain hard-won gains in immunization, recover from the disruptions caused by COVID-19, and achieve even more – by leaving no one behind, in any situation or at any stage of life.

To renew the continental focus on immunization, **the Republic of Sierra Leone** in collaboration with the World Health Organization, the African Union Commission for Health, Humanitarian Affairs aim to convene a side event on the margins of the African Union Summit of Heads of State in February 2023, **to position immunization as a key contributor to people’s fundamental right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable physical and mental health and also as a critical investment in Agenda 2063 and the SDG2030 Agenda, creating a healthier, safer, more prosperous Africa for all.**

Moreover, the side event will reignite and galvanize the continental political commitment to accelerate approaches of the IA2030 to ‘catch-up, recover and get back’ to the trajectory of reaching the IA2030 goals and strategic objective two of the AU Africa Health Strategy (2016-2030) aimed at reducing morbidity and ending preventable mortality from communicable and non-communicable diseases and other health conditions in Africa by sustaining and scaling up expanded programs on immunization.

Objectives of the Side Event:

The 90-minute side event will convene Heads of State on the margins of the AU Summit in February 2023 and aims to culminate in a signed declaration of commitment by Heads of State to close the gap on immunization in Africa as well as fast track implementation of IA2030 approaches aimed at reducing child mortality, morbidity and disability. In addition, the side event plans to achieve the following objectives:

1. To **reignite the political will of Africa's leaders to keep universal access to immunization at the forefront of national recovery efforts** intended to achieve long-term health, economic and development goals.
2. To renew political commitment to supporting investments in strengthening surveillance to detect outbreaks quickly, respond with urgency, and **immunize all children who are not yet protected from vaccine-preventable diseases in Africa.**
3. To **motivate urgent integration of polio functions, assets, innovations and lessons to accelerate last mile polio eradication action and boost routine immunization capacities** on the continent