Delivery of Routine Immunisation Services Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Challenges & Opportunities

Key messages

- A nearly 30% increase in "zero-dose" children was observed in 2021, resulting in the decline of DTP3 coverage - highlighting the importance of reaching children with a first dose of vaccine.
- As a result of lower vaccination rates in 2021, 228 million people *(mostly children),* have been at risk for vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, yellow fever, and polio.
- In addition to higher mortality rates, these vaccine-preventable diseases risk adding pressure to countries' health systems, resources and capacity.
- The response to COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to create a more equitable and sustainable approach to immunisation and reach missed communities with essential services.

The challenge

COVID-19, the world's most widespread pandemic in the century, has put health systems in all countries under unprecedented strain. Countries have been able to respond to COVID-19 owing to previous investments in their health systems. However, strict lockdowns and shifting government priorities to combat the pandemic disrupted health services and routine immunisation, highlighting and exacerbating inequities both within and between countries.

The effects of the pandemic have varied between lower-income countries, as many of them found it challenging to accelerate the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines while maintaining and extending the reach of routine immunisation systems. For children's healthcare, the global coverage rate for diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTP3) doses - a benchmark for measuring global immunisation coverage - dropped to 83% in 2020 from 86% in 2019.[1] In addition, coverage of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines in lower income countries has taken a particular hit during the pandemic, with average vaccine coverage now standing at 8% compared to 13% globally.[2]

When compared by region, the disparity in DTP3 vaccination continued into 2021. Asian and Latin American countries experienced more severe disruption in routine immunisation, which has resulted in an increase in "zero-dose" children in those countries.[3] Outreach services and

[1] UNICEF UK, "Path to Progress: Policy Briefing the Covid-19 Response as a Catalyst for Strengthening Health and Immunisation Systems." (January 2022), https://www.unicef.org.uk/path-to-progresss/
[2] World Health Organization, "Global Market Study- HPV." (March, 2022), https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/immunization/mi4a/who-hpv-vaccine-global-market-study-april-2022.pdf?sfvrsn=6acb4c98_1&download=true
[3] Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "Routine Immunisation Worldwide Holds Firm Despite the Pandemic." (September 2021),

supplemental immunisation aimed at vulnerable, remote, and hard-to-reach populations took a more severe hit during the pandemic in most countries. As a result, the number of children who had not received even a single dose of DTP vaccine increased by 3.5 million globally in 2020, with Gavi-supported countries accounting for 78% of the increase.[4]

The risk

Disruption of immunisation services run the risk of increasing vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks. In 2020, WHO, UNICEF, and Gavi reported that disruptions to routine immunisation services had put 80 million children under age one at risk of contracting vaccine-preventable diseases.[5] By 2021, 60 mass immunisation campaigns have been postponed in 50 countries, putting around 228 million people – mostly children – at risk for diseases such as measles, yellow fever, and polio.[6] Undoubtedly, the detection of a wild polio case in Malawi, the ongoing vaccine derived polio cases, and measles outbreaks in several countries are grim reminders that equity gaps might be widening, reversing the hard-won gains.

The opportunity

Despite the adverse effects of COVID-19, there is an opportunity to restore and maintain resilient and sustainable immunisation systems that deliver real change for people's lives, putting the world firmly on course to reach Sustainable Development Goal 3. More than two years since the onset of the pandemic, there have been promising signs of this restoration owing to unprecedented collaboration between Vaccine Alliance partners like WHO, UNICEF, governments, civil society, and health workers. The need to ensure that we "leave no one behind" in the recovery presents a window of opportunity to catch up on children missed before and during the pandemic – including the 10.6 million "zero-dose" children.[7] By reaching these children with life-saving vaccines, routine immunisation offers a platform to reach vulnerable and marginalized communities with additional basic services. Furthermore, efforts to deliver COVID-19 vaccines, such as investments in health workforce and supply chain systems, could be leveraged to strengthen routine immunisation platforms in countries, promoting access to age-appropriate vaccines across the life course for the benefit of all.

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https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/routine-immunisation-worldwide-holds-firm-despite-pandemic

[4] Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "Reaching Zero-Dose Children." (November 2021), https://www.gavi.org/our-alliance/strategy/phase-5-2021-2025/equity-goal/zero-dose-children-missed-communities

[5] World Health Organization, "Agencies Call for Joint Effort to Safely Deliver Routine Immunization and Proceed with Vaccination Campaigns Against Deadly Vaccine-Preventable Diseases." (May 2020), https://www.who.int/news/item/22-05-2020-at-least-80-million-children-under-one-at-risk-of-diseases-such-as-diphtheria-measles-and-polio-as-covid-19-disrupts-routine-vaccination-efforts-warn-gavi-who-and-unicef

[6] Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "Ambitious New Global Strategy Aims to Save Over 50 million Lives Through Vaccination." (April 2021), https://www.gavi.org/news/media-room/immunization-services-begin-slow-recovery-covid-19-disruptions-though-millions

[7] Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "Annual Progress Report-2020.", https://www.gavi.org/progress-report