

Following the remarkable success of the first vaccination week in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2010, in which an unprecedented 100 per cent of countries in the Region participated, I am pleased to announce that WHO and partners are launching the second Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean during the week of 24 to 30 April 2011. In 2011, in addition to the WHO regions of the Americas, Europe and Eastern Mediterranean, two other WHO regions, African and Western Pacific, will celebrate this event for the first time.

Through innovative and combined advocacy, education and communication activities, the Vaccination Week initiative intends to raise awareness, increase vaccine utilization, mobilize resources and secure strong political support for immunization programmes.

Despite the recent progress of the Expanded Programme in Immunization in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, an estimated 1.3 million children aged under 5 years died in 2008 in the Region. And, one out of five deaths is primarily due to pneumonia and diarrhoeal diseases, which can, in part, be prevented by the newly available potent and safe pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines.

However, the introduction of pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines is slow, mainly because there is a lack of awareness regarding the level of disease burden and the cost-effectiveness of these vaccines. In addition, in 2009, around 2 million children did not complete the basic vaccination schedule for their first year of life.

The Region continues to face persistent challenges to reaching set targets, such as the eradication of polio and elimination of measles and maternal and neonatal tetanus. Undoubtedly, difficult and emergency situations, varying technical and managerial capacity at the national level, competing priorities and lack of ownership, and insufficient government financial commitment have hindered our progress towards national and regional targets.

One point is clear though. No one, no one person, no one agency, sector or even governments can overcome the daunting challenges and achieve the ambitious goals alone. It was, therefore, agreed that the Region and countries adopt the theme of “partnership for immunization” for the 2011 Vaccination Week initiative.

In line with our regional vision that "No child should die from a vaccine-preventable disease", the Global Immunization Vision and Strategy and the recently announced Decade of Vaccines, I hope that we can join hands and work together to reach the most vulnerable, finish the unfinished agenda, and sustain the success stories in our diverse and complex Region.

I am convinced that we can leverage this event to further expand and formalize partnerships, explore possibilities for innovative financing, work across national borders, engage and collaborate with communities, media and the private sector, and maintain immunization high on the agenda of policy and decision-makers.

As with to the first Vaccination Week, the 2011 event should inspire innovative national events with regional relevance.

Moving forward I anticipate similar country commitment and leadership with the involvement of key partners such as UNICEF, nongovernmental organizations, communication, media and the private sector.

Only through our collective efforts can we ensure that all people, young and old, are protected against vaccination-preventable diseases. Let us partner for immunization and remember that vaccination is the obvious choice.

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