

It is with great pleasure that I address you today at this momentous event, the launch ceremony for the first Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I would like to extend a warm welcome to Her Excellency the First Lady of Lebanon, Mrs Wafaa Michel Sleiman, who has kindly agreed to be the patron of this major event. As a respected public figure advocating for the well-being of people in our Region, Her Excellency will bring much deserved attention to the importance of immunization as a major life-saver.

A year ago, I stood with Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, together with the WHO Regional Directors for the Americas and Europe and pledged our Region's support for the Vaccination Week initiative. Today I am proud to announce that 22 countries of the Region are participating in this historic initiative, signalling to the world that immunization is a regional and national priority. Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean also coincides with similar endeavours established in two other regions—Vaccination Week in the Americas and European Immunization Week. This unprecedented collaboration among the three regions, with well over 100 countries participating in simultaneous vaccination weeks will provide further momentum towards a global vaccination week.

In our region, the goals and objectives of Vaccination Week are to enhance communication and dissemination of information on the importance of immunization, and to use a combination of innovative approaches to increase community demand and improve access to immunization, particularly for the vulnerable populations in the Region.

During Vaccination Week, a variety of activities are being carried out by participating countries, including workshops, training sessions, social mobilization, round table discussions, exhibitions and media events, addressing a wide range of vaccine-related issues. In addition, vaccination services such as tracking of unvaccinated people, implementing large-scale vaccination campaigns and using Child Health Days to deliver an integrated package of life-saving health interventions will also take place.

Immunization ensures good health. We know that great progress has been made in this region to reduce illness and death due to vaccine-preventable diseases. More people than ever before are being reached with immunization; 20 countries have maintained their polio-free status; the 90% measles mortality reduction goal has been achieved three years ahead of schedule and an increasing number of countries are introducing new and under-used vaccines. Moreover, the benefits of immunization are increasingly being extended to adolescents and adults, providing protection against life-threatening diseases such as influenza, meningitis and cancers that occur

in adulthood.

However, more needs to be done if we are to reach Millennium Development Goal No. 4 aimed at reducing child mortality. An estimated 2.1 million people in our Region were unvaccinated in 2008. Reaching these vulnerable populations – typically living in poorly served remote areas, deprived urban settings and in war-torn states – is one of our biggest challenges.

Furthermore, about 1.3 million infants and young children worldwide die every year from pneumococcal disease and rotavirus diarrhoea, mostly in developing countries. A large number of these deaths can be prevented through vaccination with newly available vaccines. However, introducing new vaccines into national immunization programmes will require additional financial commitment from developing countries, particularly the low-income and lower middle-income countries, and from donors to meet the increased cost of these vaccines. As such, innovative mechanisms to mobilize resources are urgently needed to assist countries.

The consequences of failing to immunize people at risk cannot be overstated: the re-emergence of diseases that were formerly under control, the spread of diseases to countries where they had been eliminated, and the continuing toll on millions of people in terms of illness, disability and death.

Let us use Vaccination Week as an opportunity to revive political commitment to, and increase public awareness of, the importance of immunization. It is my firm belief that our continued collaboration will make this initiative a success. Remember, vaccination is a family and community responsibility.

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