



Minister of Health Dr Ali Hajiadam Abubakar poses for a group photo with health partners to kick-start World Immunization Week 2024 in Mogadishu, Somalia. Photo credit: 29 April 2024, Mogadishu, Somalia – While marking World Immunization Week this year, Somalia’s Federal Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization UNICEF/Maslah (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have jointly urged partners and donors to accelerate immunization efforts to reach every child in Somalia.

This year’s World Immunization Week coincides with the 50th anniversary of the global Essential Programme on Immunization and aims to spur greater engagement around immunization, to reiterate the importance of vaccination and improve the health and well-being of every child, everywhere. This year’s commemoration highlighted the successes of immunization in Somalia since 1978 and the challenges that require a concerted effort – the uninterrupted, 7-year circulation of the polio variant; the large number of children who have never been vaccinated (zero-dose children); the recurrent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles, diphtheria and whooping cough; and the need for an expanded resource envelope to tackle these challenges.

Speaking at a press conference in Mogadishu on Sunday, Federal Minister of Health for Somalia Dr Ali Hajiadam Abubakar said that despite Somalia having had the best-performing immunization programmes in the Eastern Mediterranean Region historically, prolonged conflict and instability in the last few decades have resulted in a weakened, fragmented and severely underfunded health system.

“This year’s theme – Humanly Possible – serves as a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to ensure that every child in Somalia has access to life-saving vaccines. The introduction of new vaccines such as the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine and rotavirus vaccine later this year will further help us to combat pneumonia and diarrhoea, 2 diseases that contribute greatly to child mortality in Somalia,” he said.

“The coverage in Somalia is still insufficient to effectively combat vaccine-preventable diseases, and consequently we have experienced various outbreaks,” said Ms. Patience Musanhu, Senior Country Manager for Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. “I wish to reiterate Gavi’s commitment to continue its investment in vaccines and immunization to ensure equitable vaccination coverage across the country. I strongly urge all stakeholders to redouble their efforts to increase vaccination coverage to safeguard children against

vaccine-preventable diseases.”

“Vaccines are one of the greatest success stories of public health. And yet, despite all the knowledge and resources available globally, children in Somalia continue to contract vaccine-preventable diseases. For example, in first quarter of 2024, 382 people have been confirmed for measles, 75% of which are children under 5 years of age in Somalia,” said Dr Reinilde Van De Weerd, WHO Representative to Somalia. “Greater efforts are needed, with an integrated approach to tackle the systemic challenges the country is facing by its health system, that affect the delivery of essential health services and hinder progress in Somalia’s commitment toward universal health coverage.”

Globally, immunization programmes have been the bedrock of primary health services in communities and countries due to their reach and coverage. A major landmark study released this week reveals that global immunization efforts have saved an estimated 154 million lives – or the equivalent of 6 lives every minute of every year – over the past 50 years. The vast majority of people saved – 101 million – were infants.

The study, led by WHO and to be published in The Lancet, shows that immunization is the single greatest contribution of any health intervention to ensuring babies not only see their first birthdays but also continue to lead healthy lives into adulthood.

“In Somalia, the threat from vaccine-preventable diseases remains alarmingly high, with an estimated 1.5 million children under 5 known as ‘zero-dose’ children. These children are the most vulnerable, having never received any vaccines, and are disproportionately affected by diseases such as measles, diphtheria and whooping cough,” said UNICEF Representative to Somalia Ms Wafaa Saeed. “Let us all commit, as leaders, health professionals and global citizens, to safeguard the future of our children by ensuring that every child in Somalia receives their right to immunization. Let’s make this humanly possible.”

Some of the challenges Somalia faces in ensuring all communities have access to vaccinations include a fragile health system, further impeded by conflict and natural disasters; limited access to cold chain facilities in remote areas and among hard-to-reach populations; and difficulty in reaching people living in insecure and inaccessible locations.

“The high number of unimmunized and underimmunized children in Somalia who live in contexts such as IDP [internally displaced person] camps, urban poor settings and hard-to-reach areas increases risks of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks. For the past 5 years, we have been grappling to respond to at least 2 outbreaks each year, as evident from the national surveillance reports,” said Save the Children Acting Country Director Dr Binyam Gebru. “While we stand here today in solidarity to mark this World Immunization Week, let’s reaffirm our commitment to ensure every child in Somalia gets immunized, which is a basic human right, and I believe with concerted efforts, this is humanly possible.”

Over the years, WHO, UNICEF and partners have extended support to Somalia to develop systems to store different vaccines, establish systems to vaccinate children, and to compile and store data around immunization for decision-makers to use. Despite all the challenges, Somalia has had some success in getting more children vaccinated using strategies such as mobile outreach facilities in addition to fixed vaccination sites. Additionally, teams of health workers and social mobilizers, supported by the government, WHO and UNICEF, are regularly visiting communities to share messages on the benefits of vaccination.

Yet the country needs more support to protect children, particularly vulnerable ones, from vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, cholera, polio, diphtheria, tuberculosis, pertussis and tetanus.

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