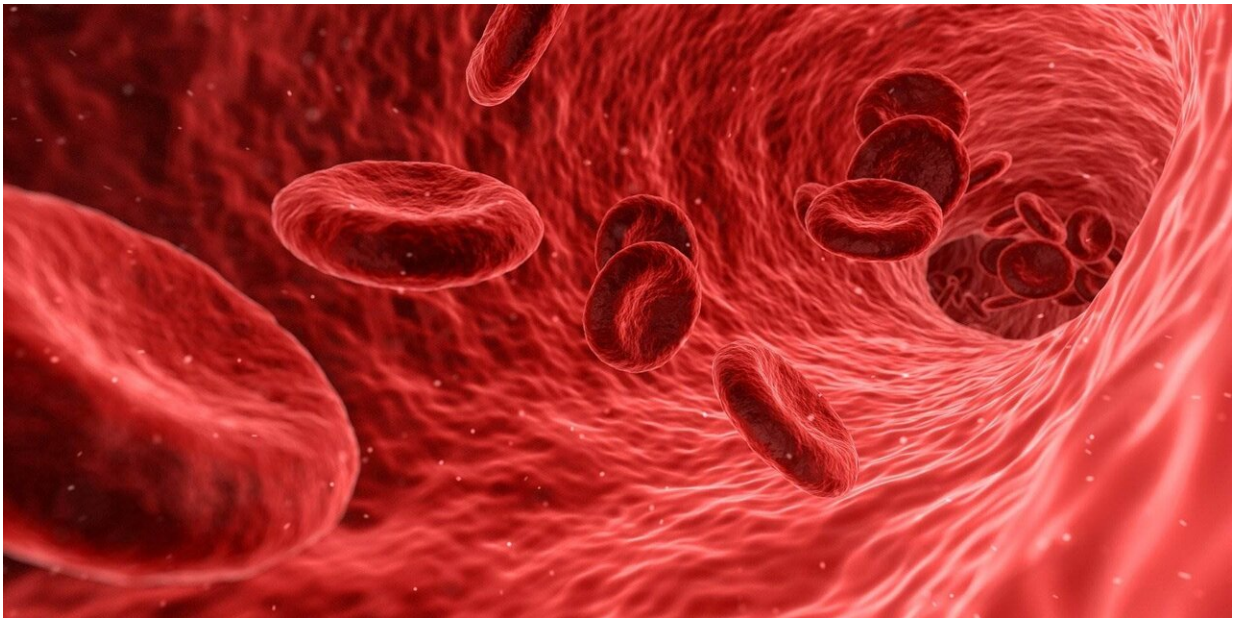


Why the world is at risk without immunization

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Credit: Arek Socha from Pixabay

Imagine a world in which everyone is at risk of contracting a contagious disease with no prevention or cure. A world in which billions of people live in fear of a disease that is fatal to many, and that has the power to shut down entire economies.

For many, such a frightening scenario would have been confined to the realms of creative imagination just a year ago despite the warnings of

public [health](#) experts. Yet, this is the reality we live in today as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected over 16.5 million people and killed more than 655,000 as of 29 July 2020.

Global health crisis

While this [global health crisis](#) continues to put a strain on [health systems](#) and economies around the world, it is also threatening the health and wellbeing of populations in more ways than one. In July 2020, the WHO and UNICEF warned of an alarming decline in the number of children receiving life-saving vaccines worldwide, due to COVID-19 lockdowns and the disruption of essential health services. At least 21 countries are experiencing vaccine shortages as a result of the pandemic, while vaccination campaigns for diseases such as polio, cholera, yellow fever and meningitis, among others, have been postponed—already affecting more than 13.5 million people.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed outbreaks of these very diseases in several African countries—[yellow fever](#) and measles in Uganda, measles and polio in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and cholera in Ethiopia, among others. These outbreaks—and continuous implementation of catch-up campaigns—in several African countries are an indication of the gaps in immunization coverage. For example, in West and Central Africa, immunization coverage stagnated at 70% for polio and 71% for measles in 2018, while in Eastern and Southern Africa, regional immunization coverage was 77% for polio and 76% for measles. These gaps in coverage leave millions of children at risk of life-threatening diseases.

The value of vaccines

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread and researchers and

scientists across the globe work tirelessly to develop a vaccine we are reminded, now more than ever, of the immeasurable value of vaccines.

Vaccines save lives. They are the bedrock of primary health care, and one of the most important tools we have at our disposal to protect the health and wellbeing of children and adults everywhere. When people are vaccinated, they have a better chance of leading healthy, productive lives and fighting off new infections thanks to improved immunity.

COVID-19 paints a clear picture of what a world without vaccines could look like. Without protection and immunity against deadly infectious diseases, lives are lost, and public health, safety and economic growth are threatened. Strong immunization systems are critical to equipping populations with the capacity to withstand public health shocks.

Building commitment on vaccination programs

While the pandemic presents many challenges, it also presents an opportunity for collaboration among sectors, and for increased political commitment towards robust, sustainable vaccination programs. In addition, COVID-19 has elevated the role of data and data systems for health service delivery and response in African countries, and will determine how we use them to inform vaccine availability, targeted interventions and hot-spot mapping going forward. It is an opportunity to rethink delivery of immunization services across the globe, including how we can best reach marginalized and underserved communities.

In June, the Global Vaccine Summit was held—for the first time virtually—with the aim of mobilizing funding to improve access to quality immunization services. The Summit raised US\$8.8 billion in pledges, funds that will be used to immunize 300 million children against infectious diseases and save up to 8 million lives over the next five years. In the past two decades, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has helped

vaccinate more than 760 million people around the world through routine immunization, and reached nearly 1 billion people through targeted campaigns aimed at responding to [disease](#) outbreaks and boosting immunization rates, especially among vulnerable populations. However, more still needs to be done to reach the millions of children in Africa who have not been immunized.

Even as governments set their sights on flattening the COVID-19 curve, they must ensure that the delivery of essential services such as immunization remains a priority. In low- and [middle-income countries](#) especially, reallocation of funds previously earmarked for routine immunization and other public health initiatives could lead to a reversal in gains made towards preventing, and in some cases eradicating, [vaccine](#)-preventable diseases.

It is therefore critical that now, perhaps more than ever, we prioritize immunization and ensure that life-saving vaccines reach all people, especially the most vulnerable. As we work to contain COVID-19, let us also ensure that we do not lose the gains we have worked so hard to achieve. By continuing to invest in immunization, we can protect current and future generations from preventable diseases, and build a healthier, more prosperous world for all.

Provided by SciDev.Net

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