

# Media Update

15 July 2021

## United Nations

### SECRETARY-GENERAL MESSAGE

#### THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

--

#### MESSAGE ON WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY “Reimagining youth skills post pandemic” 15 July 2021

Today, we celebrate youth resilience, drive and innovation in times of COVID-19.

Young people were already facing disproportionate levels of unemployment and under-employment before the pandemic. More than one out of five youth were not in employment, education, or training, the majority of them young women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated this troubling situation. In many cases, it has forced organizations to pause skills development training. Distance learning posed a particular challenge for Technical Vocational Education and Training, particularly among marginalized youth.

To recover better, we must address the longstanding disparities and challenges faced by young people. That means ramping up skills development and education, with a particular focus on climate action, sustainable development, gender equality and inclusivity. It is crucial to boost investments in Technical Vocational Education and Training, broadband connectivity and digital skills.

Young people drive solutions and must have a seat at the table, including in policy-making processes at the local, national, and global levels. Youth2030, the United Nations system-wide Youth Strategy, lays out the roadmap for the

UN and partners to work for and with young people worldwide. I urge everyone to make the most of this framework and together, build an inclusive, fair and sustainable development for all.

I wish you a happy and productive World Youth Skills Day.

\*\*\*

## WHO - UNICEF

### PRESS RELEASE

## COVID-19 reversals in childhood vaccinations in South Asia undo years of progress, new WHO, UNICEF data shows

*Childhood vaccination rates in South Asia plummeted by 6 per cent points from 2019 to 2020, with 5.3 million children missing out on lifesaving vaccines through routine health services in South Asia in 2020, the highest number since 2014*

**KATHMANDU, 15 July:** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to major reductions in childhood vaccinations in South Asia, with coverage of basic vaccination dropping by 6 per cent points from 2019 to 2020. More than 5.3 million children in South Asia missed out on essential vaccines through routine immunization services in 2020 – nearly 1.9 million more than in 2019 - according to official data published today by WHO and UNICEF. This is the highest number of under-vaccinated children since 2014.

Between 2019 and 2020, the South Asia region experienced a sharp decline in children receiving three doses of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP3) vaccine, falling from 90% to 84%. The percentage of children covered by three doses of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP3) vaccine had increased steadily from 6 per cent in 1980 to a record high of 90 per cent in 2019 in South Asia.

“It is heartbreaking to see this reversal in child vaccinations due to COVID-19 in a region where tremendous progress was being made, thanks to political will and collective action,” said George Laryea-Adjei, UNICEF Regional

Director for South Asia. “Nearly 4.4 million children are not even receiving a single dose of a vaccine that can protect them from deadly diseases, which is almost twice as many as the previous year. This is a huge setback for children in South Asia, as it puts their lives at risk, and leads to unspeakable suffering.”

The majority of countries in South Asia experienced drops in childhood vaccination rates. The rates for DTP3 reduced by 9 per cent points in Nepal; 7 per cent points in Pakistan; 6 per cent points in India; 3 per cent points in Sri Lanka and 2 per cent points in Bhutan and Afghanistan. However, robust recovery efforts mounted in many countries towards the end of the year helped to blunt the impacts of overall declines. In India, for example, vaccination drives in remote areas are helping to reach missed children. Globally, the data shows that just 10 countries account for 62 per cent of all under- or unvaccinated children globally. India – particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic – had the highest number of unprotected children worldwide at 3.5 million, an increase of 1.4 million. Pakistan had 1.3 million unprotected children in 2020, an increase of 0.4 million.

Concerningly, most of these children did not receive a single vaccine during the year, an indication that the most vulnerable, hard-to-reach children are paying the steepest price for pandemic-related disruptions to vaccine access. At nearly 4.4 million, in 2020 South Asia recorded the highest number of children having failed to receive any routine vaccination in the past ten years. More than 3 million of these “zero-dose children” in 2020 lived in India.

Measles remains a concern, as well as outbreaks of diseases like diphtheria and yellow fever which can spread quickly where people are unvaccinated. In South Asia, coverage for the first dose of the measles vaccine fell from 92 per cent in 2019 to 88 per cent in 2020. This is well below the 95 per cent recommended by WHO to protect against measles. South Asia has had lengthy school closures, which have had significant ramifications for several vaccines such as HPV, which is critical for the achievement of cervical cancer elimination, and which is offered to children and adolescents at school. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, childhood vaccination rates against diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, measles and polio had increased steadily for more than a decade in South Asia, as opposed to other regions in the world where coverage rates mostly stagnated. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many health facilities and personnel were diverted to support the COVID-19 response. In some countries, health facilities have been closed or hours reduced, while some families may have delayed seeking healthcare because of safety fears.

As the health community attempts to recover lost ground due to COVID-19 related disruptions, UNICEF, WHO and partners are supporting government efforts to strengthen immunization systems in the region by:

- Restoring services so countries can safely deliver routine immunization services during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Helping health workers communicate actively with caregivers to explain the importance of vaccinations;
- Rectifying coverage and immunity gaps, including identifying communities and people who have been missed during the pandemic.

Beyond disruptions to immunization, other essential healthcare services in South Asia also experienced severe disruptions in 2020. Research commissioned by UNICEF has estimated that in 2020, 228,000 children died due to disruptions to essential healthcare services in South Asia. The main killers of children in South Asia are diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhea, which are both preventable and treatable when essential health services are operational, and families feel safe to use them.

“COVID-19 related disruptions are not just affecting vaccination efforts, but also other critical maternal and child health services. Today, the biggest health threat to children in South Asia is not from COVID-19, but from the childhood diseases which continue to kill children in the region,” added Laryea-Adjei. “UNICEF calls on governments to invest in essential maternal and child health services, to ensure the most vulnerable children don't succumb to preventable diseases while COVID-19 rages on.”

#####

**Download photos and multimedia content on child vaccinations in South Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic [here](#).**

### **About UNICEF**

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

For more information about UNICEF and its work for children in South Asia, visit <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/>.

### **For more information, please contact:**

Eliane Luthi, UNICEF South Asia, +977-98010 30076, [eluthi@unicef.org](mailto:eluthi@unicef.org)

Sabrina Sidhu, UNICEF South Asia, +19174761537/  
+919818717522, [ssidhu@unicef.org](mailto:ssidhu@unicef.org)

Kurtis Cooper, UNICEF New York, +1 917 957-6536, [kacooper@unicef.org](mailto:kacooper@unicef.org)