

Measles deaths in Africa plunge by 91%

Geography & Geology

Posted by: niccosan

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Africa leads a strong decline in global measles deaths.

Measles deaths in Africa fell by 91% between 2000 and 2006, from an estimated 396 000 to 36 000, reaching the United Nations 2010 goal to cut measles deaths by 90% four years early. The spectacular gains achieved in Africa helped generate a strong decline in global measles deaths, which fell 68% worldwide – from an estimated 757 000 to 242 000 – during this period.

The progress was announced today by the founding partners of the Measles Initiative: the American Red Cross, UNICEF, the United Nations Foundation, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The data will be published in the November 30th editions of WHO's Weekly Epidemiological Record and CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

"This is a major public health success and a tribute to the commitment of countries in the African region," said Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General. "We need to sustain this success and intensify our efforts in other parts of the world, as there are still far too many lives lost to this disease."

The significant decline in measles deaths in Africa was made possible by the firm commitment of national governments to fully implement the measles reduction strategy, which includes vaccinating all children against measles before their first birthday via routine health services and providing a second opportunity for measles vaccination through mass vaccination campaigns.

"The clear message from this achievement is that the strategy works," said CDC Director Dr. Julie Gerberding. "The next step is to fully implement this strategy in South Asia, where measles disease burden is now the highest in the world."

Mass vaccination campaigns have had a major impact on reducing global measles deaths. From 2000 to 2006, an estimated 478 million children aged nine months to 14 years received measles vaccine through campaigns in 46 out of the 47 priority countries severely affected by the disease.

In 2006, global routine measles vaccination coverage reached an estimated 80% for the first time, up from 72% in 2000. The largest improvements in vaccination coverage were in the African and the Eastern Mediterranean regions.

"The dramatic drop in measles deaths in Africa and the strong progress being made worldwide are a testament to the power of strong partnerships and the impact they can have on child survival," said Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director of UNICEF. "But measles is still killing nearly 600 children under five every day, an unacceptable reality when we have a safe, effective, and inexpensive vaccine to prevent the disease."

Major challenges still need to be overcome to achieve the goal to cut global measles deaths by 90% in the period 2000-2010. Large countries with high numbers of measles deaths, such as India and Pakistan, need to fully implement the proven control strategy. Currently, about 74% of measles deaths globally occur in South Asia.

In addition, countries that have implemented accelerated measles control activities must sustain the gains that they have made. This means that all measles priority countries must continue conducting follow-up vaccination activities every two to four years until their routine immunization systems are capable of providing measles vaccination to all children.

“Through the tireless efforts of millions of health workers and volunteers from our Red Cross and Red Crescent family, as well as our dedicated partners, such as the Latter-day Saints, we literally go door-to-door informing, educating and motivating mothers and caregivers about the critical need to vaccinate their children,” said Bonnie McElveen-Hunter, Chairman of the Board of the American Red Cross. “These mobilization efforts are essential for our success, helping us consistently reach more than 95 percent of the vulnerable population and saving countless lives.”

A key factor contributing to progress in reducing measles deaths has been the strong support of the Measles Initiative and the GAVI Alliance. Since its launch in 2001, the Initiative has supported vaccination efforts in over 50 countries and mobilized more than US \$470 million with help from partners such as the GAVI Alliance.

“The successful reduction of measles deaths would not be possible without the collaborative work among many partners—including governments, the United Nations, NGOs, corporations and volunteers from local communities—each of which bring unique strengths and resources that are essential for success,” said Kathy Calvin, executive vice president and chief operating officer, United Nations Foundation. “We commend our partners for coming together to protect children around the world from measles.”

Background:

The Measles Initiative is a partnership committed to reducing measles deaths globally. Launched in 2001, the Initiative—led by the American Red Cross, the United Nations Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, UNICEF and WHO—provides technical and financial support to governments and communities on vaccination campaigns. To learn more, visit www.measlesinitiative.org.

Other key partners in the fight against measles include the GAVI Alliance, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Becton, Dickinson and Company, the Izumi Foundation, the Vodafone Group Foundation, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and countries and governments affected by measles.

www.who.int

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