



QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

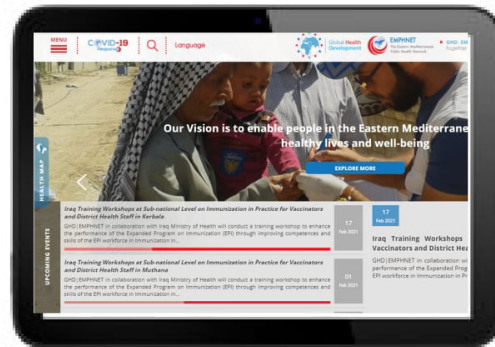
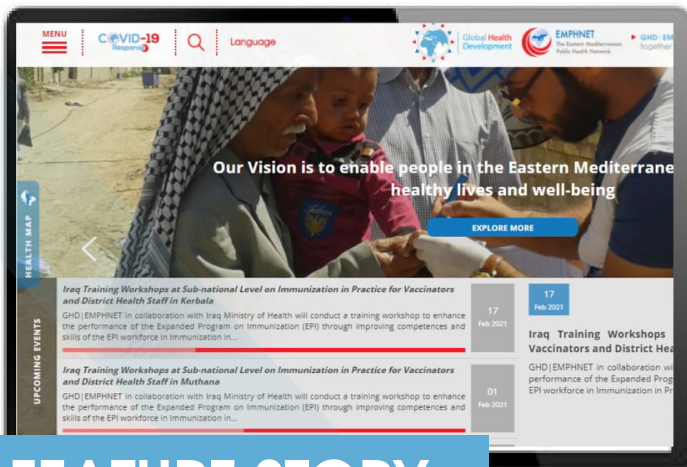
Issue No. 40

October - December 2020

GHD | EMPHNET continues to accelerate its contribution to the COVID-19 response in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR). This issue highlights GHD | EMPHNET's support in several areas, especially in knowledge exchange through the EMPHNET WEbi Series, the Online Learning Management System, and the rich information that is now made available through different features of the new GHD | EMPHNET website. This issue also focuses on GHD | EMPHNET's support to Africa CDC in accelerating COVID-19 testing, a support which was expanded in the past quarter to include more EMR countries in northern Africa. This issue also showcases GHD | EMPHNET's collaborations with partners in the region towards maintaining essential health services during the pandemic.

Editorial Team





FEATURE STORY

GHD | EMPHNET LAUNCHES ITS NEW WEBSITE

In early 2021, GHD | EMPHNET officially launched its new website at www.emphnet.net after months of hard work put into developing and designing a comprehensive digital reference on GHD | EMPHNET's work, news, events, announcements, and more.

The new website comes in two languages: Arabic and English, and it offers users easy navigation of rich content on GHD | EMPHNET's growth and experience gained over the years. It spotlights the important work of GHD | EMPHNET's Public Health Programs and Center of Excellence for Applied Epidemiology. The new website provides users with information on GHD | EMPHNET's history, working areas with related projects, strategy, partnerships and collaborations, scope of work, regional conferences, webinars, and initiatives in support of better health for people in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR).

The new website presents multi-media resources made available to ensure that users know more about GHD | EMPHNET's work through media appearances, success stories, annual reports, project briefs, news stories, newsletters, news archives, and more. Furthermore, the website includes an E-library that houses publications from Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs) in the EMR, GHD | EMPHNET's publications including case studies, and other useful resources relevant to public health. The E-library will be further enhanced to provide user with access to journals and books.

We welcome you to our new website and we urge you to subscribe to our newsletter and follow us on our social media platforms. We also welcome your feedback, comments, or messages which you can deliver to us through the "Contact Us" feature.

EMPHNET WEBI SERIES HOLDS FOUR MORE WEBINARS

Through its EMPHNET WEBI Series, GHD | EMPHNET continues to bring to the forefront important public health issues and problems relevant to the Eastern Mediterranean region (EMR). During the past quarter, EMPHNET WEBI Series held four webinars whose speakers were notable public health figures from across the region and the globe. Focusing on public health issues in the context of COVID-19, the webinars discussed the following topics:

1. [Impact of COVID-19 on Polio Eradication, and Other VPDs Elimination and Control Efforts](#)
2. [The Role of Public Health Laboratories and Testing in the COVID-19 Response](#)
3. [Event-based Surveillance in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: Progress and Best Practices](#)
4. [A New Lens for NCDs in the Context of COVID-19](#)



SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLIC HEALTH EXPERTS

DR. ADEL BELBEISI

Dr. Adel Belbeisi is a notable public health expert from Jordan whose career in the field spans over thirty-five years. Dr. Belbeisi has broad technical and managerial experience in numerous public health areas, most notably in infectious diseases and Polio eradication. From the earliest days of his career, he began to serve in leading positions and later accumulated his wealth of experience from assuming important roles at Jordan Ministry of Health (MoH): Assistant to Secretary General for Primary Healthcare, Secretary General of Jordan Medical Council, and Director of Disease Prevention and Control Unit. Dr. Belbeisi was also a long-time member of two national committees: the National Vaccination and the Epidemic Committees. Regionally, Dr. Belbeisi also served as a consultant for the World Health Organization on Polio eradication in Egypt.

In 2013, Dr. Belbeisi joined GHD | EMPHNET as a Senior Technical Advisor, a position he has been serving ever since. Holding a significant role within the organization, Dr. Belbeisi oversaw the technical and opera-

tional management of several projects implemented by GHD | EMPHNET in Jordan and the region. Dr. Belbeisi contributed to achieving the GHD | EMPHNET's vision, mission, and goals by supporting the expansion of the organization's scope of support for countries in the region: polio eradication and routine immunization, biorisk management, mass gatherings, non-communicable diseases, and more. Dr. Belbeisi's guidance was important in identifying key areas of support for national public health needs. Dr. Belbeisi also served on Joint External Evaluation (JEE) missions in several countries in the region.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Belbeisi led GHD | EMPHNET's support for Jordan MoH, heading a team who assisted the Ministry technically, technologically, and logistically. Under his supervision, the team took part in development of plans, automation of weekly epidemiological reports, provision of relevant training, and support for laboratories in data management. At the time of the earliest COVID-19 infections in northern Jordan, in Irbid, the team supported the Minis-

try's epidemiological investigation in case finding and definition, contact tracing, sample collection, and more.

Dr. Belbeisi has several publications in peer-reviewed journals, covering issues such as routine immunization, Polio eradication, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, and much more reflecting his broad range of experience in several public health areas.

Dr. Belbeisi holds an MD from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia.



NEWS UPDATES

GHD | EMPHNET JOINS THE UN IN COMMEMORATING ITS 75TH ANNIVERSARY

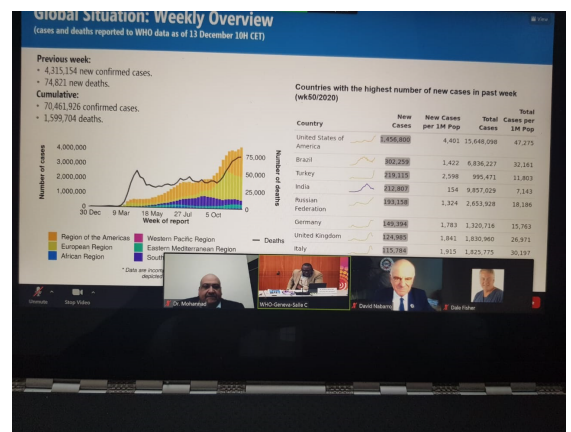
GHD | EMPHNET, represented by its Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al Nsour, participated in the first webinar of a series planned around “UN at 75 Facing the Global Pandemic” that took place on December 12, 2020. Dr. Al Nsour, along with other specialists from the United States of America and the United Kingdom, addressed health as one of the affected areas of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In his talk, Dr. Al Nsour discussed the impact of COVID-19 on health and shared his experience, reflecting on GHD | EMPHNET’s work with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and North Africa. He focused on the types of strategies and regulations the countries chose to control the pandemic, and communities’ participation throughout.

GHD | EMPHNET AND UNHCR SOLIDIFY THEIR PARTNERSHIP AND SIGN A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

In Jordan, GHD | EMPHNET and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) solidified their partnership in signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on October 25, 2020. GHD | EMPHNET’s Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour signed the agreement on behalf of GHD | EMPHNET, while the UNHCR representative in Jordan, Dominik Bartsch, signed the agreement on behalf of UNHCR. This MoU furthers the collaboration between both entities and aims at setting out the terms and conditions for supporting refugee camps in Jordan particularly in COVID-19 response.

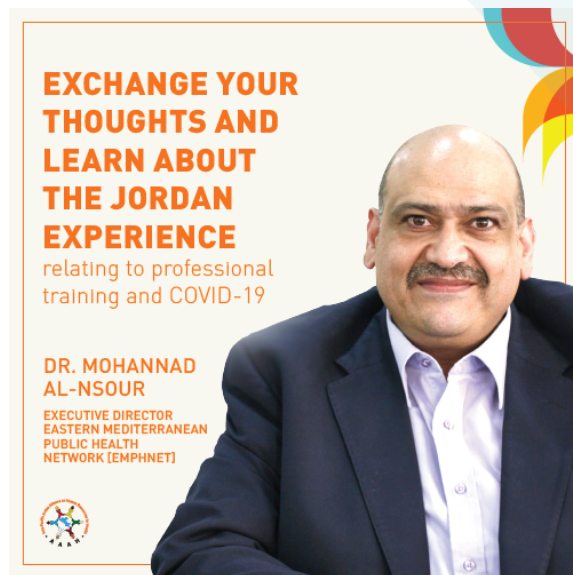
GHD | EMPHNET PARTICIPATES IN THE 28TH GOARN STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

On December 14 and 15, 2020, GHD | EMPHNET, represented by its Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour, participated in the virtual 28th Steering Committee (SCOM) Meeting of the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN). During the meeting, GHD | EMPHNET gave special attention to the important role that Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs) have at the regional and global level and highlighted their significant response contributions during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



GHD | EMPHNET PARTICIPATES IN 11ST ASIA PACIFIC ACTION ALLIANCE ON HUMAN RESOURCES FOR HEALTH WEBINAR SERIES 2020

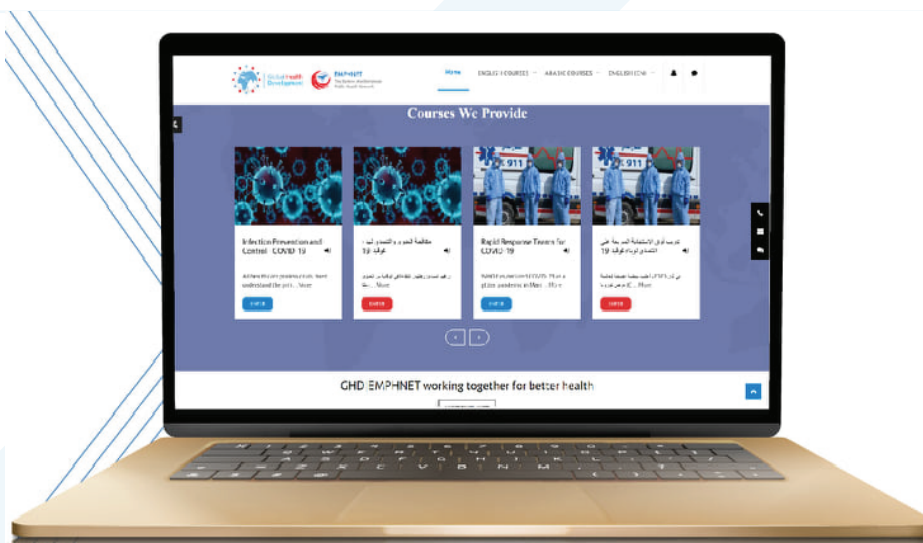
Representing GHD | EMPHNET, Executive Director Dr. Mohannad Al Nsour participated in the 11st Asia Pacific Action Alliance on Human Resources for Health (AAAH) Webinar Series 2020 “Addressing Health Care Workers’ Challenges in Response to COVID-19: Sharing experiences and drawing countries’ lessons” on November 20, 2020. As part of his participation, Dr. Al Nsour highlighted the several challenges facing health workers in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including needs for formal training, shortages in health workers, lack of incentives, and more. Furthermore, Dr. Al Nsour highlighted GHD | EMPHNET’s support for Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs) in the region in COVID-19 response. He also proposed a number of recommendations which included the provision of online training as an effective tool for transferring important knowledge during and post pandemics.



GHD | EMPHNET’S ONLINE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM LAUNCHED WITH THREE COURSES

As part of GHD | EMPHNET’s integration of online training into public health workforce development and in response to the growing demand for e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, GHD | EMPHNET established its Learning Management System (LMS) as a free, open-source platform that hosts its online programs and courses. The LMS enables the delivery of education courses and training programs as well as interactions between instructors and learners through online assessments, tests, assignments, and interactive dialogue.

In response to the countries’ increasing training needs to build their capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, GHD | EMPHNET recently developed and launched three online courses on its LMS targeting health professionals and other relevant staff who are involved in managing and responding to public health emergencies, specifically the COVID-19 response. These courses were designed to offer health professionals, public health workers, support staff and students skills they need to enhance their performance and deepen their knowledge in areas related to COVID-19 response activities. These three courses cover the areas of **Risk Communication**, **Infection Prevention and Control**, and **Rapid Response Teams for COVID-19**. The courses adopt the online, self-paced learning model and are offered in English and Arabic. Visit our LMS at lms.emphnet.net.





GHD | EMPHNET CONTINUES ITS SUPPORT FOR POLIO LEGACY PROGRAM IN EGYPT

Egypt's strong experience and investments in Polio Eradication Program present an important opportunity to utilize existing human and material resources to sustain Polio essential functions, accelerate measles /rubella elimination, and strengthen routine immunization. This opportunity was successfully seized when GHD | EMPHNET supported Egypt's Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) in the successful implementation of the Polio Legacy Program in three frontier governorates: Aswan, Matrouh, and Red Sea. Taking place over a two-year period between 2017 and 2018, this support was part of the first phase of the project titled **Utilizing Polio Program Assets to Reach the Targets for Measles/Rubella Elimination and Strengthening the Routine Immunization (RI) Program**.

In 2020, building on the success of the project's first phase, GHD | EMPHNET and the MoHP expanded the project into four highly populated governorates: Greater Cairo, Giza, Qalubia, and Sharkia. Inhabited by one-third of the country's population, these governorates are considered at high risk for Polio importation and outbreaks of other Vaccine Preventable Diseases (VPDs). Reaching these governorates with RI services is a challenge because of their hard-to-reach demographic make-up: urban slums, nomadic groups, and expatriates from neighboring countries.

Relying on the experience gained from the implementation of the first phase, GHD | EMPHNET is supporting the MoHP in identifying high-risk groups with low measles immunity, raising community awareness among such groups, implementing action plans to accelerate measles /rubella elimination, strengthening immunization, and sustaining Polio-free status in these high-risk governorates.

This support took the form of capacity building activities at the grassroots level- with emphasis on community engagement which is key to advancing the utilization of Polio assets. In two months, from October 18 to December 22, 2020, the MoHP, in collaboration with GHD | EMPHNET, trained over 480 health staff members working at the level of health units. Sessions were designed to familiarize staff with various topics related to RI: defining the VPDs: measles, rubella, and AFP; describing the reporting process of VPDs; detecting and reporting suspected cases and unimmunized population; and conducting micro-surveys and implementing response activities. Other sessions aimed to highlight the importance of effective communication in responding to questions and concerns about vaccination and communicating appropriate messages to the target population.

Over 450 community volunteers were trained as well. They were introduced to key concepts in Polio Legacy Programs, VPDs, and AFP. They also sat through sessions on communication skills needed when dealing with targeted communities.



GHD | EMPHNET EXPANDS COLLABORATION WITH AFRICA CDC IN ACCELERATING COVID-19 TESTING IN NORTHERN AFRICA

In August 2020, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched the Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing (PACT): Test, Trace, Treat. PACT mobilizes experts, community workers, supplies, and other resources to diagnose, identify, and provide care for COVID-19 cases promptly to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the African continent.

In August 2020, GHD | EMPHNET joined Africa CDC in the implementation of PACT activities in Egypt, Somalia, and Sudan. Collaborating with the African Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) to implement PACT activities, GHD | EMPHNET provided support to these countries specifically in the identification, orientation, and deployment of community health workers (CHWs) who can assist in contact tracing and raising awareness among the public. In two months, GHD | EMPHNET supported capacity building within PACT by training over 200 CHWs on surveillance, infection prevention and control (IPC), and laboratory practices. GHD | EMPHNET also provided logistic support to these CHWs to facilitate their work during field deployment.

In late 2020, GHD | EMPHNET expanded its support for PACT to include Morocco and Tunisia. In both countries, GHD | EMPHNET supported virtual training for supervisors who will later train CHWs. The training covered the tasks which CHWs will undertake such as contact tracing, detection of COVID-19 cases, engagement with communities through psychosocial support, and provision of support for people quarantined at home. Some of the training's topics focused on CHW's safety by using Personal Protective Equipment and other means.

Within its support for PACT activities, GHD | EMPHNET also worked with Sudan Federal Ministry of Health to strengthen surveillance systems during the pandemic. In Sennar state, a training was conducted for surveillance officers to enhance their knowledge in different aspects of surveillance. Conducted virtually, the training discussed different types of surveillance, focusing on tasks such as defining cases, creating line lists, as well as analyzing and reporting data.

GHD | EMPHNET SUPPORTS ROUTINE IMMUNIZATION PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP FEASIBILITY STUDY IN AFGHANISTAN

To define the role of the private health sector in routine immunization (RI) delivery in an attempt to increase its engagement in RI, the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH)-with support from GHD | EMPHNET, is conducting a feasibility study on Public-Private Partnerships and their role in improving RI coverage in low-performing districts and provinces in Afghanistan. In preparation for the study implementation, data collectors and field supervisors were trained on how to collect reliable and dependable data by accurately filling out the required questionnaires and using effective communication during interviews. Ten surveyors and two supervisors from the province of Paktya participated in the training which took place between December 8 and 9, 2020. The implementation of the study is expected to commence in early 2021.



GHD | EMPHNET SUPPORTS IRAQ IN STRENGTHENING IMMUNIZATION IN PRACTICE

Assuring a competent workforce within the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) is key to strengthening routine immunization (RI). This is a principle that Iraq Ministry of Health (MoH) is putting into practice as it is ensuring that EPI staff- whether newly appointed or experienced- is equipped with the necessary knowledge needed to provide safe and effective vaccines to their users.

With support from GHD | EMPHNET, Iraq MoH is conducting cascade training workshops for EPI staff at central, provincial, district, and frontline levels in 10 provinces: Babel, Baghdad, AlKerkh, Diyala, Diwaniya, Kirkuk, Kerbala, Misan, Muthana, Thi Qar, and Wasit.



Thirty-five Training of Trainer (ToT) workshops were conducted between October 12 – 15, 2020, on immunization in practice (IIP). The ToTs prepared participants to present IIP information effectively when training peripheral health care workers who administer vaccination. Sessions refreshed participants' knowledge on a range of topics from the general to the more specific: immunization schedule, vaccine safety, vaccine preventable diseases, vaccination in special situations, vaccine facts as opposed to myths and rumors, vaccine administration, and principals of interpersonal communication for immunization.

In early 2021, GHD | EMPHNET will continue to support Iraq MoH in rolling out the training to vaccinators and district health staff.

PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE IN FOCUS

GHD | EMPHNET SUPPORTS COUNTRIES IN SUSTAINING POPULATION IMMUNITY TO VACCINE PREVENTABLE DISEASES DURING COVID-19

COVID-19 negatively affected immunization programs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) as there was a significant decline in immunization activities, especially during March and April 2020. When World Health Organization Guidelines, country Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs), and Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) were made available, these programs resumed their work. However, challenges remained to catch up on activities missed earlier in the year.

As an essential health service, immunization must be maintained even at the time of the pandemic through planning and implementation based on an assessment of vaccine preventable diseases' (VPDs) epidemiology and immunization system resources and consideration of transmission scenarios of COVID-19 as well as corresponding mitigation measures.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, GHD | EMPHNET has supported ministries of health in several EMR countries in the continuation of immunization services despite the pandemic.

SUPPORTING IRAQ'S EXPANDED PROGRAM ON IMMUNIZATION IN REACHING DEFAULTERS AND UNIMMUNIZED CHILDREN

In Iraq, immunization services have been significantly disrupted due to the COVID-19 emergency pandemic response. According to the National Immunization Program, there has been a deterioration in vaccine coverage for almost all antigens in the first half of 2020 by 20-30% compared to 2019, making Iraq among the most affected countries in terms of immunization disruption in the EMR. Movement restrictions, deployment of vaccinators in the COVID-19 response- even infection of some with COVID-19-, and reduced demand from the public over concerns of exposure to COVID-19 are reasons for disrupting immunization services. There was a need to resume vaccination programs to prevent further deterioration in coverage before children's lives could be threatened by diseases other than the coronavirus.



With the COVID-19 emergency disrupting immunization services, an eminent threat looms: decreased vaccination coverage, along with high reported dropout children, jeopardizes achievements of the National Immunization Program with the accumulation of susceptible individuals who could lead to the emergence of VPD outbreaks.

In the face of such a threat, Iraq Ministry of Health (MoH), with support from GHD | EMPHNET, worked on improving the strategic utilization of immunization services to enhance reaching unimmunized children in high-risk areas and track defaulters to vaccinate them according to the national schedule.

GHD | EMPHNET supported Iraq MoH in reviewing, operationalizing, and implementing of routine immunization (RI) microplans in two high risk provinces with high number of unimmunized children and high drop rates: Diwaneya and Diyala. In these areas, GHD | EMPHNET also contributed to intensifying immunization activities by providing logistics support for the implementation of outreach immunization sessions to reach and vaccinate unimmunized and dropout children. Each session was conducted under safe conditions as immunization outreach teams were equipped with infection prevention and control equipment and sanitizers to prevent COVID-19 transmission.

IMPROVING IMMUNIZATION FRONTLINE WORKERS' CAPABILITIES IN LIMITING RISK OF COVID-19 TRANSMISSION DURING VACCINATION SESSIONS IN AFGHANISTAN



Fear from getting the infection of COVID-19 during immunization sessions is a recognized concern for both caregivers and vaccination providers. Not only does investing in vaccinators' capacity to implement different infection prevention and control (IPC) measures contributes to global effort to control the pandemic, but it also enhances adherence of both providers and beneficiaries to immunization schedules.

To address this identified gap in Afghanistan, GHD | EMPHNET supported Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health in adopting national guidelines to limit the risk of COVID-19 transmission during vaccination sessions. In collaboration with GHD | EMPHNET, a ToT on IPC practices at the national level was conducted to all regional EPI trainers. In the coming weeks, these trainers will train frontline EPI health workers in low-coverage, and the most provinces affected by COVID-19: Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktya, and Parwan.