



# Policy Brief

October 2023

## Life Course Immunization: A Safer World for All Ages



### Executive Summary

The Immunization Agenda of 2030 (IA2030) aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in emphasizing equitable vaccine access throughout an individual's life. Drawing insights from EMPHNET's 34th Webinar, this policy brief addresses the intricacies of life course immunization.

Central challenges include disparate vaccine coverage across age groups, particularly among adults, pregnant women, and the elderly. Developed countries often misperceive the risks of infectious diseases, leading to vaccine hesitancy. This hesitancy is compounded by the "3Cs": complacency, convenience, and confidence, and is further fueled by digital platforms amplifying anti-vaccine sentiments. Additionally, there's a notable lack of advocacy for adult vaccination among healthcare professionals. Historical practices,

### Approach

This policy brief originates from a webinar organized by the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET), facilitated by EMPHNET's Technical Officer, Ms. Leen Daoud. The webinar was graced by esteemed experts, including Dr. Mohammed Osama Mere (Life Course Immunization Lead and COVID-19 Vaccination Regional Coordinator at WHO's EMRO), Dr. Suha Shawqi Albayyat (Health Emergency Director, Health Emergency Department, Qatar Ministry of Health), and Dr. Ciara Sugerman (Acting Lead, Immunization Delivery Science Team, Global Immunization Division, CDC). Their combined expertise delved into topics ranging from the strategies for strengthening immunization policies and service delivery to the integration of life-course vaccination into health programs. Their collective insights into the transformative power of vaccines, barriers to vaccination, and the benefits of a life-course approach to immunization form the foundation of the recommendations presented in this brief.

such as the exclusion of pregnant women and older adults from vaccine trials, have resulted in data deficits and increased hesitancy in these groups.

This policy brief recommends a holistic approach. It suggests enhancing collaboration among healthcare specialties and promoting comprehensive disease prevention. Vaccination messages should be culturally sensitive, adapting to societal norms and thereby introducing a fourth dimension to the "3Cs": Cultural acceptance. Digital platforms should be harnessed to disseminate accurate vaccine information, countering myths, and building trust. Combining behavioral insights with scientific research can lead to more effective communication strategies. Moreover, vaccination should be portrayed as an integral part of a broader health promotion narrative. Lastly, aligning with WHO guidelines can address missed vaccination opportunities through improved record-keeping and communication.

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## Introduction

Immunization is a crucial public health intervention that has drastically reduced the impact of infectious diseases globally. The Immunization Agenda of 2030 (IA2030) provides a global strategy to maximize the preventive and protective power of vaccines through equitable access, particularly emphasizing a life-course approach. Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), IA2030 seeks to ensure that individuals, regardless of age or geographic location, derive full benefit from vaccines, thereby enhancing global health and well-being.

This policy brief, based on EMPHNET's 34th Webinar in its Webi Series, aims to explore the mechanics and implications of life course immunization, addressing its pivotal role in disease prevention and health promotion, confronting barriers to vaccination across various life stages, and discussing strategies that integrate immunization effectively into broader health initiatives and policies. By examining these elements within the context of IA2030 and the SDGs, the brief ultimately seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of strategies, challenges, and opportunities within life course immunization.

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## The Problem

Life-course immunization is a key health strategy that emphasizes vaccination from infancy to old age, but this strategy encounters multifaceted barriers impeding its global implementation and acceptance. Worldwide, disparities in vaccination coverage among different age groups, particularly pregnant women, adults, and older adults, highlight significant obstacles like knowledge gaps regarding adult vaccination benefits, vaccine hesitancy, and inconsistent health recommendations across countries.

The diminished sense of risk regarding infectious diseases in developed countries, primarily attributed to previous successes over diseases like tetanus and polio, has created a false sense of security. Consequently, some people have begun to fear the potential risks of vaccines more than the illnesses they fend off. Vaccine hesitancy, partially fueled by the internet and social networks, has intensified. These digital platforms empower anti-vaccine groups, enabling them to contest authoritative, scientifically backed health information. The "3Cs" model by the World Health Organization pinpoints three critical elements contributing to this hesitancy: complacency, convenience, and confidence, which are crucial in shaping public vaccine-related decisions.

Low vaccine coverage, especially among adults, hampers the universal achievement of community immunity. The causative factors for such shortfalls in vaccine uptake are many, encompassing poor access, lack of public and healthcare professional (HCP) vaccine knowledge, and inadequate HCP advocacy for adult vaccination.

Challenges further amplify when considering special populations such as pregnant women and older adults. Historically, these groups have been excluded from clinical vaccine trials, leading to a shortage of specific, applicable data and hesitancy among HCPs and the populations themselves. However, with an emerging trend toward developing vaccines specifically for pregnant women and conducting trials in these groups, it's vital to combat the embedded caution and reluctance through education and awareness initiatives.

## **Policy Recommendations**

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### ***Transcending Healthcare Silos:***

Invest in strengthening digital infrastructure to ensure consistent and high-speed internet access, targeting both urban centers and underserved rural areas. The success of scaling up hinges on foundational tech infrastructure.

### ***Cultivating Cultural Acceptance:***

Introduce the fourth 'C' – Cultural acceptance – by embedding vaccination within the cultural norms of societies. This involves tailoring communication and strategies to be culturally sensitive and resonant, ensuring they are not only accessible but also socio-culturally acceptable.

### ***Engaging Digital Discourse:***

Utilize digital platforms and social media to prompt meaningful public discourse and disseminate accurate vaccine information. By fostering spaces where diverse public viewpoints are acknowledged, and by collaborating with

reputable figures, community leaders, and healthcare professionals, we can bridge the gap between scientific understanding and public perception. This combined approach aids in the transition from vaccine availability to acceptability while actively countering myths and misconceptions.

### ***Behavioral and Sociological Insight Integration:***

Intertwine behavioral and sociological studies with scientific research to devise communication and implementation strategies that resonate on a sociocultural level. Understanding behavioral patterns and sociological factors enables crafting messages and strategies that amplify public awareness and acceptance.

### ***A Paradigm of Holistic Health Advocacy:***

Prioritize training programs that empower healthcare professionals to effectively utilize digital tools. Establish collaborations with educational institutions to integrate digital health concepts into medical and healthcare curriculums.

### ***Catch-up Vaccination:***

Align with WHO's guidelines on catch-up vaccination to address missed immunization opportunities. This includes integrating catch-up schedules in routine programs, opportunistic catchups, and organized campaigns. Accurate record-keeping and communication strategies are paramount for this initiative. By addressing these core areas, the EMR can optimally leverage digital health initiatives, driving improved healthcare outcomes and accessibility for its populace.

## References

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### **GHD|EMPHNET: Working Together for Better Health**

The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) is a regional network that focuses on strengthening public health systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and beyond. EMPHNET works in partnership with ministries of health, non-government organizations, international agencies, private sector, and relevant institutions from the region and the globe to promote public health and applied epidemiology. To advance the work of EMPHNET, Global Health Development (GHD) was initiated to build coordination mechanisms with partners and collaborators. Together, GHD|EMPHNET is dedicated to serving the region by supporting efforts to promote public health policies, strategic planning, sustainable financing, resource mobilization, public health programs, and other related areas.

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