

“Ensuring the integration of refugees and migrants in immunization policies, planning, and service delivery globally”

SUMMARY

The event “*Ensuring the integration of refugees and migrants in immunization policies, planning, and service delivery globally*” took place on May 24th at the margins of the seventy-fifth World Health Assembly, and was sponsored by Luxembourg and co-sponsored by Argentina, Colombia, Lebanon, Poland.

The event included an opening high-level segment with opening remarks by H.E. Paulette Lenert, Minister of Health, Luxembourg; H.E. Carla Vizzotti, Minister of Health, Argentina; H.E. Fernando Ruiz Gomez, Minister of Health, Colombia; H.E. Firass Abiad, Minister of Health, Lebanon; and a video message by Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO. The segment was chaired by Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, Deputy Director-General, WHO.

In the technical segment, an overview of the Global Evidence Review on Health and Migration (GEHM) report on Immunization “*Ensuring the Integration of Refugees and Migrants in Immunization Policies, Planning, and Service Delivery Globally*” was presented by Dr Santino Severoni, Director, Health and Migration Programme, WHO and Dr Ann Lindstrand, Unit Head for the Essential Programme of Immunisation, WHO; followed by remarks from Professor Grzegorz Juszczuk, Director, National Institute of Public Health, Poland; Dr Petra Khoury, Director, Health and Care Department, IFRC; and Dr Alice Wimmer, Senior Migration Health Officer, IOM.

The event aimed to highlight the paramount importance of integrating refugees and migrants in immunization policies, planning, and service delivery to advance the promotion of the health of refugees and migrants, as well as global commitments to improve the health of populations. In addition, it also flagged the relevance of collecting and utilizing accurate data as a basis for evidence-based policies, with a particular focus on immunization. During the event, an overview of the third WHO Global Evidence Review on Health and Migration was also presented, specifically highlighting the barriers that prevent refugees and migrants, especially those in irregular and vulnerable situations, from accessing vaccines.

Opening High-Level Segment

H.E. Paulette Lenert, Minister of Health, Luxembourg, reflected on the need for continuous support in ensuring access to health services, including vaccination, as reminded by the WHO Global Action Plan on Refugee and Migrant Health 2019-2023 (GAP) and the COVID-19 pandemic, and how migrants and refugees often remained unvaccinated. H.E. Paulette Lenert concluded that “a shift towards migrant-sensitive and adaptable vaccination services, systems, and policies, with coproduction of tailored interventions and clear, consistent public health messaging, is key to address specific vaccine access and acceptance barriers in migrants and strengthen vaccination programmes.”

H.E. Carla Vizzotti, Minister of Health, Argentina, reaffirmed the country’s commitment to the GAP and to the Immunization Agenda 2030, and shared good practices on the national level. H.E. Carla Vizzotti stated that “for Argentina, health is considered as a universal human right and in this sense,

as representative of the Ministry of Health, our great challenge is to ensure access to quality health services for the whole population, no matter their place of origin.”. The COVID-19 Vaccination Strategic Plan, which initiated the greatest national vaccination campaign in the history of our country, considered the vulnerability criteria in different groups, including migrants, in order to ensure access to vaccines for people on the move, no matter their legal status.

H.E. Fernando Ruiz Gomez, Minister of Health, Colombia, shared good practices at the national level and renewed its commitment to continue sharing experiences, good practices and lessons learned that have allowed to carry out the National Vaccination Plan, including vaccination of the migrant population. In relation to COVID-19 vaccination, Minister Fernando Ruiz reiterated that in Colombia "regardless of their immigration status, (everyone) can be vaccinated".

H.E. Firass Abiad, Minister of Health, Lebanon shared the challenges faced in ensuring vaccination in the country, including the purchase of COVID-19 vaccines, due to the economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, which has hindered the purchase of vaccines while. At the same time, the country is not able to apply to receive vaccines through the COVAX initiative.

Lastly, **Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus**, Director-General, WHO reiterated how refugees and migrants are some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the world, and in many countries, they are not entitled to vaccination, or face difficulties accessing vaccines. WHO is working with countries to address these challenges, and is pushing for the full inclusion of refugees and migrants in immunisation plans and other essential health services. WHO concluded that we can only build a healthier and more resilient world if they are included in health policymaking.

Technical Segment

During the technical segment, **Dr Santino Severoni**, Director, Health and Migration Programme, WHO, shared that from a public health perspective, it is particularly important to improve global vaccine coverage, being this one of the most effective public health interventions, vital to the prevention and control of infectious-disease outbreaks, such as COVID-19. WHO recommended that refugees and migrants globally should have non-discriminatory and equitable access to immunization programmes. With regards to the third GEHM, WHO described that it aims to provide an overview of policy and practice with respect to the inclusion of refugees and migrants in immunization systems globally, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that it identified specific and unique barriers for refugees and migrants, including those related to awareness of and physical access to immunization services, that strongly influence vaccine uptake and motivation to vaccinate, especially for irregular migrants. **Dr Ann Lindstrand**, Unit Head for the Essential Programme of Immunisation, WHO, focused on the impact on the COVID-19 pandemic in the number of zero-dose children, and with about 23 million children missing out on basic vaccines in 2020 alone – the highest number since 2009, putting everyone at risk. The Immunization Agenda 2030: A Global Strategy to Leave No One Behind (IA2030) is WHO collective strategy and vision for meeting ambitious immunization targets this decade. WHO reiterated vaccines can only deliver on the promise of helping to end the acute phase of the pandemic if they reach everyone who needs to be vaccinated, and are distributed equitably. The GEHM report refers the importance of documenting barriers for refugees and migrants including those related to

awareness of and physical access to immunization services, that strongly influence vaccine uptake and motivation to vaccinate particularly among these populations.

Professor Grzegorz Juszczuk, Director, National Institute of Public Health, Poland, mentioned that the country has a mandatory National Vaccination Plan for all children under 18 years old, with vaccine uptake around 90-95%. Furthermore, since February 2022 Poland has welcomed more than 3,5 million of refugees from Ukraine and all of them have been immediately entitled to take voluntary COVID-19 vaccine, as well as other vaccines for children. However, due to stress related with war trauma and immense feeling uncertainty among refugees, they have been less interested in vaccine uptake than expected.

Dr Petra Khoury, Director, Health and Care Department, IFRC, focused on IFRC's experience regarding immunization at country level.

Lastly, **Dr Alice Wimmer**, Senior Migration Health Officer, IOM, focused on the topics of preparedness and vaccination, which were also central issues during the International Migration Review Forum.