**Enhancing Immunization in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina**An Insight into Project PIRI (Period of Intensive Routine Immunization) – Interim results

While immunization had seen a consistent growth as a vital public health measure, its coverage faced a major setback due to health system disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, globally, 14.3 million infants did not receive an initial dose of diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP) vaccine, pointing to a lack of access to immunization (and other health) services, and an additional 6.2 million were only partially vaccinated*[[1]](#footnote-1)*. Monitoring data is critical to helping countries prioritize and tailor vaccination strategies and operational plans to address immunization gaps and reach every person with life-saving vaccines.

In April 2023, the World Health Organization's country office in Bosnia and Herzegovina joined hands with the Institutes of Public Health in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBIH), Bosnia and Herzegovina, to support a groundbreaking initiative: Period of Intensive Routine Immunization for Childhood (“PIRI project”). This 10-month project is devised to strengthen the routine immunization of children in cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Project PIRI, backed by WHO's expertise and support, monitors immunization data on a weekly basis. This regular assessment allows for an in-depth analysis that guides targeted interventions and strategies, ensuring that children’s health records are up to date, and more easily accessible. An additional objective is to transition from traditional paper-based systems to digital records, fostering improved data management, easier access to information, and ultimately, better healthcare delivery.

The project’s primary objective is to maximize the number of children receiving essential vaccines, thereby creating a robust shield against a host of preventable diseases.

Mr Dino Peco, team lead from the Department of Epidemiology of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton Institute of Public Health highlighted the significance of the project on the healthcare system: *‘The PIRI project is essentially the first serious initiative to improve immunization coverage in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through regular reporting, as well as constant monitoring of cases, we contribute to the increase in the immunization coverage. Though parents generally remain quite skeptical, we certainly noticed a positive shift in almost all municipalities in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. If we now mainstream the project activities in our routine work, I believe that then we can sustain optimal immunization coverage levels.’*

Beside disruptions in health care services caused by COVID-19, immunization programmes have to cope also with vaccine hesitancy among parents, which was exacerbated by the disinformation spread around the COVID-19 vaccine. Some of the common concerns underlying hesitancy include uncertainty about the need for vaccination and questions about vaccine safety and efficacy.

Preliminary analysis reveals that the PIRI project made a significant positive impact on immunization coverage in FBIH. Led by health workers across most health centres in FBIH, the project could already gather data on more than 11,000 children. Most children had received BCG and hepatitis B vaccines. With regard to the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccinations, the first dose saw a notable increase in the vaccination rate of nearly 10%: from 69.3% to 76.0% (N=10,433). The second dose saw a relatively steady increase of 25.3% (N=4,019). The MMR vaccination’s significant increase in adherence is a highlight in these statistics, reflecting a successful effort in encouraging vaccinations for measles, mumps, and rubella.

Through a similar project, WHO supports also the government’s immunization agenda in the Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This project will be launched in September 2023.

Looking ahead, we anticipate that by the conclusion of the two projects, the proportion of newly vaccinated children will have risen significantly, painting a picture of a healthier future for the children in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The data collected in PIRI project provides a promising snapshot of how effectively the project is closing the immunization gap. As we continue to invest our resources and efforts into this important initiative, we anticipate even greater progress in the near future. Mainstreaming of the project’s activities as part of routine immunization services will also contribute that this change is sustainable.

1. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/immunization-coverage>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)