

WR Talking points for African Vaccination Week 2026 Webinar theme “For every generation, Vaccines work.”

Knowledge Hub: 10-12hrs

WR speaking at 1015-1035hrs

Distinguished colleagues, esteemed health workers, partners, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor to join everybody at this webinar marking African Vaccination Week 2026 under the theme, “*For every generation, Vaccines work.*” I extend warm greetings on behalf of the Departments of Health, the UN and our partners, and sincere appreciation for your continued commitment to protecting the health and well-being of communities across South Africa.

Vaccines have long been one of the most powerful tools in public health. Over the past 50 years, vaccines have saved more than 150 million lives not by accident, but because ordinary people made the decision to protect themselves, their children and their communities from diseases like measles, diphtheria, pertussis, polio, and rotavirus.

This year’s theme “For every generation, Vaccines work.” is both timely and powerful. It reminds us that immunization is not a single intervention at one point in life, but a continuous, life-saving investment that spans generations. Vaccines are among the most effective public health tools ever developed. They protect infants, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. They reduce suffering, prevent outbreaks, and strengthen the resilience of health systems. Simply put, vaccines work consistently, equitably, and across the life course, helping people at every stage of life live longer and healthier thanks to scientific advancements.

As we gather today, we do so at a critical moment. The global immunization community has reached the midpoint of the Immunization Agenda 2030. This milestone offers us an opportunity not only to reflect on progress, but also to accelerate efforts where gaps remain. Across the African region, immunization continues to prevent an estimated 1.8 million deaths each year. Since 2000, nearly 500 million children have been reached with life-saving vaccines. These are not just numbers, they represent lives protected, families preserved, and futures secured.

We have also witnessed remarkable achievements in recent years. The expansion of HPV vaccination is protecting adolescent girls from cervical cancer. Maternal immunization is safeguarding both mothers and newborns. The introduction of malaria vaccines in multiple African countries offers renewed hope in the fight against one of the continent’s most persistent diseases. Furthermore, countries such as Cabo Verde, Mauritius, and Seychelles have demonstrated that the elimination of measles and rubella is achievable through strong leadership, high coverage, and robust surveillance systems. Vaccines are saving lives.

These successes illustrate what is possible when governments, health workers, communities, and partners align behind a shared vision.

Here in South Africa, there is much to commend. The Expanded Programme on Immunization has built a strong and comprehensive platform. All WHO-recommended vaccines are included in the national

schedule and are widely accessible through both public and private sectors. This ensures that children across the country can receive a full course of life-saving immunizations.

Equally important is the strength of the system in retaining those who enter it. South Africa has demonstrated good completion rates for children who begin their vaccination schedules, an achievement that reflects the dedication and diligence of health workers at all levels and care givers and communities. This continuity of care is essential for ensuring full protection.

South Africa has also made significant strides in strengthening disease surveillance and response systems. The integration of immunization services with maternal, newborn, nutrition, and communicable disease programs reflects a forward-looking approach that aligns with the life-course immunization concept. This integrated model enhances efficiency, improves access, and ensures that vaccination is embedded within a broader continuum of care.

However, even with these strengths, challenges remain. Across the African region, millions of children are still either zero-dose (unvaccinated) or under-immunized. In South Africa, while vaccines are available and systems are functional, coverage in certain districts has not yet reached desired targets. Inequities persist, and misinformation continues to affect public confidence in vaccines.

Addressing these challenges requires honesty, commitment, and collective action. We must strengthen community engagement, ensuring that we listen to concerns, provide clear and evidence-based information, and build trust. Health workers play a central role in this effort. Your interactions with patients and communities are often the most trusted source of information. Through your dedication, you help translate policy into impact.

We must also continue to prioritize reaching zero-dose children, those who have never received a single vaccine. These children are often found in underserved, marginalized, or hard-to-reach communities. Reaching them requires targeted strategies, data-driven planning, and sustained outreach efforts.

This brings us to the central focus of today's session: life-course immunization. Immunization does not end in childhood. It extends to adolescence, through HPV vaccination; to adulthood, through booster doses and influenza vaccines; and to older populations, who remain vulnerable to preventable diseases. By embracing a life-course approach, we ensure that protection is continuous and comprehensive.

This approach also aligns with broader health system goals, promoting healthy aging, reducing the burden of disease, and enhancing resilience against emerging health threats.

Colleagues, partnerships remain at the heart of our progress. The World Health Organization, together with the National Department of Health, UNICEF, and other partners, continues to work closely to support South Africa's immunization programme. A key outcome of this collaboration is the development of a National Roadmap to Recovery.

This roadmap provides a clear and strategic pathway forward. It focuses on reaching zero-dose children through targeted interventions, strengthening surveillance and outbreak preparedness, addressing vaccine hesitancy through evidence-based communication, and ensuring sustainable financing for immunization services. It also emphasizes the importance of integrating lessons learned into routine systems, thereby building resilience for the future.

Importantly, this roadmap is not just a plan, it is a shared commitment. It reflects the determination of government, partners, and health workers to close gaps, restore momentum, and ensure that no one is left behind.

As we look ahead, we must remain guided by the principles of equity, access, and accountability. Every community deserves protection. Every child, every adolescent, every adult has the right to benefit from vaccines. And every health worker has a critical role in making this a reality.

African Vaccination Week is more than a commemoration. It is a call to action. It is an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment, to strengthen collaboration, and to renew our focus on delivering results.

Let us use this moment to accelerate progress towards the goals of the Immunization Agenda 2030. Let us continue to build trust within communities, to strengthen systems, and to ensure that vaccines reach those who need them most.

Together, with the leadership of government, the dedication of health workers, and the support of partners and communities, we can and will succeed.

Let us stand united in our mission. Let us ensure that for every generation, today and in the future, vaccines work.

I thank you.