

Learning from Country Plans for Reaching Priority Populations with and Integrating COVID-19 Vaccination



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Image: COVID-19 Peer Learning Workshop participants visit a health clinic in Accra, Ghana to learn about Ghana's ongoing efforts to reach priority groups with COVID-19 vaccination. (Leah Ewald / Health Systems Strengthening Accelerator).

INTRODUCTION

- **What is the challenge?** Global partners provided unprecedented assistance in the form of vaccine supply and technical and financial support to low- and middle-income countries during the emergency-response phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, by the time the WHO declared an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency in May 2023, only 26% of people in low-income countries and 61% in lower-middle-income countries were fully vaccinated.¹ With the emergency response phase at an end, countries can expect to see declining financial and technical support for COVID-19 vaccination and must adjust their delivery approach to be sustainable while continuing to protect their most vulnerable populations.
- **How can this challenge be addressed?** Health workers, older adults, people with comorbidities, and pregnant women remain the most vulnerable groups to adverse outcomes of COVID-19.² The WHO recommends focusing resources on vaccinating these groups. Integration of COVID-19 vaccination into the health system has been identified as a key strategy for accomplishing this task while also creating potential efficiencies that may promote sustainability.

METHODS

- **Two assessments.** Beginning August 2023, the Accelerator examined COVID-19 vaccination delivery strategies for priority groups in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Togo and partnered with M-RITE to examine COVID-19 integration in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, and Nigeria.
- In each country, the projects conducted:
 - ✓ A **desk review** of policy documents and administrative coverage data.
 - ✓ **16-24 key informant interviews** with national and sub-national government stakeholders and partners.
 - ✓ **2-3 focus group discussions** with health workers.

RESULTS

- **Which priority groups are countries targeting?** Countries have largely adopted WHO SAGE guidelines. However, not all countries vaccinate pregnant women, and countries have occasionally added groups that were not included in guidelines at the time.
- **Which vaccination strategies are effective for reaching priority groups?** Policymakers perceive that outreach, mobile strategies, and campaigns are most effective, but little disaggregated data exists.
- **What are challenges/enablers for reaching priority groups?** Challenges include quantifying target groups, rapid roll-out of unsuitable data technologies, vaccine stock-outs, unpaid salaries, inequitable distribution of resources, and misinformation. Enablers include inclusive planning processes, engagement of local and religious leaders, addressing health worker hesitancy, partnering with civil society, and collaboration or integration with other disease control programs.
- **What is the status of integration planning?** Some assessment countries are developing integration plans, but none have finalized them. Most have assigned COVID-19 vaccination to the EPI, but coordination with other programs is nascent.
- **Is integration happening?** Countries have taken a piecemeal approach to integrating COVID-19 vaccination into the health system. While cold chain and governance are relatively integrated, countries are still determining appropriate integrated service delivery approaches. Ensuring consistent supply and demand for COVID-19 vaccination are key challenges.
- **What can we learn from integration experiences during the emergency response phase?** The assessments documented numerous successful cases of integration, including referring people from other services; using cold chain infrastructure for multiple purposes; fostering new community partnerships; reaching novel target populations; and rapidly disseminating policies and information.

PEER LEARNING

- **Assessment countries attended a workshop** in Accra, Ghana from Feb. 28 – Mar. 1, 2024 to exchange about common challenges, good practices, and learning.
- **What were the takeaways?** Declining demand for COVID-19 vaccination amongst populations, health workers, and government officials is the greatest hurdle for COVID-19 vaccination. However, officials could see opportunities to leverage COVID-19 integration learning and resources to achieve other priorities, including emergency preparedness, primary healthcare integration, strengthening life-course vaccination, and reaching zero-dose children. Areas of particular interest include strengthening community health, data digitization, cross-program coordination, and health financing for COVID-19 and other priorities.

CONCLUSIONS

- The absence of clear strategies for COVID-19 integration leaves **questions about where accountability for COVID-19 vaccination lies.**
- Partners must help countries **organize resources to meet the needs of their priority groups**, including those that are additional to WHO SAGE guidelines.
- Countries want to **preserve gains** made from integration of logistics, cold chain, and data systems that are seen as widely successful.
- **Routine immunization budgets are unlikely to accommodate COVID-19 vaccination**, particularly if targeted, costly vaccination strategies are required.
- **Improvements in data collection technologies and analysis are needed** to set targets for priority groups and understand strategies' effectiveness and cost.
- **Structuring and framing COVID-19 integration as an opportunity to strengthen health systems** in pursuit of broader objectives, such as primary healthcare integration and emergency preparedness, may make it more politically viable.