

Success story: Strengthening new vaccine introductions in Lesotho



Strategic partnerships create demand and uptake of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in all ten districts in the country.

BACKGROUND

Lesotho has one of the highest numbers of cervical cancer cases in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2020, Lesotho registered 541 cases of cervical cancer, a five-year prevalence rate of nearly 91 percent. At least 362 (67 percent) of these cases resulted in death (Globocan 2020). At the same time, access to pre-cervical cancer treatment is limited. To worsen this, in 2015, the government halted the HPV vaccine program due to limited funding.

In addition, post immunization campaign assessments and surveys since 2012 have highlighted key challenges across the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) hindering high uptake and coverage of new vaccines. These included (1) inadequate time allocated for planning, leading to rushed distribution at the district level; (2) ineffective and/or non-existent stakeholder engagement across all levels; (3) low levels of training and capacity of health workers, and (4) limited political buy-in, leading to unilateral decision-making and lack of accountability.

CHAI worked with key stakeholders to establish a technical working group and collaborative strategy for new vaccine introductions, using the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine as a gateway. This collaboration culminated in the successful application to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance for funds to restart HPV vaccines in the country.

APPROACH

In 2019, as part of CHAI's strategy to strengthen vaccine uptake and coverage, including the introduction of new vaccines, CHAI worked with the EPI to improve planning and rollout of vaccines in the country.

- First, to improve limited stakeholder engagement across all levels of management, CHAI and the EPI mapped all adolescent and cervical cancer prevention stakeholders in the country.
- All the identified stakeholders were invited for a meeting and sensitized on the need for multi-disciplinary action in planning and coordinating new vaccine introductions.
- The stakeholders were trained about the EPI program and its unique role within the Ministry of Health, the history of vaccines in Lesotho, and their benefits for the population.

- The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) through their Learner Care and Welfare Services Unit, was onboarded as a key partner for vaccination campaigns, becoming a critical signatory for the Gavi application. The MoET provided valuable information regarding their School Health and Nutrition Policy, which made allowance for delivery of vaccinations within school premises.
- The MoH and MoET agreed to collaborate on a pilot program for the introduction of HPV vaccination in schools.
- Following these initial engagements, CHAI coordinated the establishment of the New Vaccine Introduction Technical Working Group (NVI-TWG), which includes the MoH, MoET and Ministry of Local Government departments, United Nations partners, nonprofit organizations, media, and religious organizations.
- The working group developed and endorsed terms of reference and a roadmap for the development of the national HPV implementation plan.
- The team reviewed learnings from previous immunization campaigns and developed a comprehensive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. Within six months, the MoH submitted the national HPV implementation plan to Gavi for the Vaccine Introduction Grant. In February 2020, Lesotho received approximately US\$865,000 from Gavi for the reintroduction of the HPV vaccine in 2022.
- CHAI then, in collaboration with the MoH and local government national representatives, supported EPI to replicate the strategy at the district level. A similar procedure was followed, successfully engaging district health management teams, local government, and education leaders to establish District Immunization Steering Committees (DISCs) in all ten districts.
- Chaired by the District Administrator, these teams ensure immunization activities are backed by the highest decision-making offices in the districts. As a result, support for the HPV vaccine through planning (including resource mobilization), coordination, and advocacy were secured from all district stakeholders, even those not linked to health.

RESULTS

- The successful strategy implemented in Lesotho shows the importance of developing trust-based relationships with key stakeholders from the decision-making and planning to implementation stages of immunization campaign activities.
- Working with members of the DISC teams in all districts, immunization focal people were able to mobilize resources from district-based partners and line ministries, effectively cultivating district-wide ownership of the immunization campaign.
- The HPV1 vaccination uptake was high, reaching up to 84 percent of the targeted nine-to-14-year-old girls nationwide within three weeks of the campaign, demonstrating the crucial role of the MoET's school health program in delivering immunization services to school age children.

NEXT STEPS

The Ministry of Health will leverage these successes and continue strengthening the established collaborative platforms and the joint implementation of the School Health and Nutrition Policy in planning for the HPV2 vaccination scheduled in October, six months after the successful launch in April 2022.