GENEVA, 23 April 2012 – For the first time, public health communities in all regions of the world are focussing at the same time on the importance of **vaccination** against **deadly diseases**. The **World Health Organization's World Immunization** Week is being held from 21 to 28 April 2012 with activities in more than 180 countries.

The theme of the week, '*Protect your world–Get vaccinated*', aims to reinforce the importance of immunization and encourage people everywhere to vaccinate themselves and their children against serious diseases. It is also a time to recall that—in this rapidly globalizing world—disease outbreaks can affect communities everywhere.

"Vaccines have the power not only to save, but also to transform lives giving children a chance to grow up healthy, go to school and improve their life prospects," said Dr Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele, Director of the Department of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals at the World Health Organization (WHO). "The benefits of immunization aren't only for children. Vaccination offers protection to adolescents and adults against life-threatening diseases such as influenza, meningitis, and cervical cancer," he added.

Immunization is estimated to prevent between two and three million deaths each year from diseases like diphtheria, measles, mumps, tetanus, rubella and whooping cough. Vaccines are considered one of public health's 'best buys'. It is also a significant contributor to the Millennium Development Goals, particularly MDG 4—a two-thirds reduction in child mortality by 2015 (compared to 1990).

“Ironically, the fact that immunization has made many infectious diseases rare or almost unheard of has led some people to believe that they don't need to get vaccinated. But gaps in vaccination coverage put everyone at risk of disease outbreaks,” said Dr Okwo-Bele.

For some regions, these weeks have been an annual tradition to showcase the power of immunization in protecting public health; but this is the first year this recognition is global.

Activities planned during the week range from the introduction of newly available vaccines into national immunization programmes to training and workshops for healthcare workers, roundtable discussions with political decision-makers, medical professionals, parents and caregivers, as well as vaccination campaigns.

In WHO’s African Region there will be a special focus on polio eradication. In addition, other events will include the simultaneous launch of two new vaccines—pneumococcal conjugate and rotavirus, to protect children from pneumonia, meningitis and diarrhoea—in Ghana. In the Region of the Americas it is the 10th Vaccination Week, with events being held from Port au Prince, Haiti, to the border between El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and Barbados. All 23 countries and territories in WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region are participating in the 2012 Vaccination Week, with the main regional event focussing on “reaching every community”. In the European Region there is a special focus on reaching vulnerable groups with immunization, and the need to control on-going measles outbreaks. The South-East Asia Region has declared 2012 as the Year of Intensification of Routine Immunization. The

Western-Pacific Region will release the third in a series of cartoon videos about the adventures of Vacciboy and Immugirl to bring wider attention to the issue (see: http://www.epi-westernpacific.info/Kids/).

Vaccination coverage is improving globally. In three of WHO's six regions the Americas, Europe and the Western Pacific immunization coverage is more than 90%. In 2010, an estimated 109 million infants were vaccinated with three doses of diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine. But significant gaps remain. That same year, about 19.3 million infants did not receive this basic vaccine and nearly 70% of these children live in 10 countries: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa and Uganda.

The Decade of Vaccines a collaboration of leading partners in the global public health community aims to ensure the universal right of all people to the full benefits of immunization, regardless of where they are born, who they are or where they live. The global vaccine action plan will be presented to the 65th World Health Assembly in May 2012.