6 December 2012 – A **vaccination** is underway in the **Syrian Arab Republic** to **immunize children under 5 against polio and measles**

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The campaign is being implemented by the Ministry of Health (MoH) with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). In addition to the vaccines provided by MoH, UNICEF procured 1.5 measles vaccines and WHO provided doses of infant paracetamol and multivitamin syrup. The Ministry of Health has increased its advocacy messages in the media to create awareness about the campaign throughout the country.

Syria's total under-five population is almost 2.5 million children and the aim of the campaign is to reach every child, vaccinating all children below the age of five against polio and 2 million children against measles.

Due to escalations in the conflict, the national vaccination coverage for the first quarter of 2012 dropped from 95% to 80%, and it is expected to have dropped even further since then. Challenges in implementing the national immunization programme include difficulties in maintaining the cold chain (leading to destroyed vaccines) and reaching children in areas where access is limited due to blocked roads and security issues. Many vaccination /supply vehicles have been damaged or affected, resulting in critical shortages of transportation for the vaccines.

An estimated 4000 health workers and volunteers are participating in the campaign taking place across 13 of the country's 14 governorates from 26 November to 10 December. The governorate of Der El Zor was not included in the campaign as the majority of its residents have relocated to other areas in the country.

Field staff members working on the campaign have reported that some areas where the children live are inaccessible due to the ongoing conflict. Othman Mohamed, field worker and supervisor of the Damascus field teams said that despite restrictions in accessibility, the teams have so far managed to reach all children targeted to date. There are 8 mobile teams responsible for the vaccinations in Damascus, including one dedicated to reaching IDPs living in shelters. Mohamed reports that an average of 12 000 children are being vaccinated daily by the mobile teams, as well as in health centers and preschools in the city.

The MoH has requested assistance from WHO in delivering vaccines to heavily affected areas. WHO has provided MoH with incentives for supervisory visits and field missions, and distributed 650 000 vaccine doses to areas in Aleppo, Homs and Rural Damascus where MOH has restricted access.

Three days after the launch of the campaign, WHO visited 2 health centres and a medical point located in Adraa, Rural Damascus, an area hosting 200 000 Internally Displaced Persons. WHO reported that despite health staff being overburdened with an extremely high work load, the

campaign at the facilities was well managed and vaccines were available and well stored. Almost 500 children were visiting the facilities every day, including many who had not been previously vaccinated.