Vaccines prevented at least 10 million deaths between 2010 and 2015, and many millions more lives were protected from illness. The global push to end polio has reached its final stages, with just 3 remaining countries still working to eradicate this debilitating disease. The ambitious Global Vaccine Action Plan to reach everyone with vaccines by 2020 started strong but is falling behind. WHO challenges all health leaders to make immunization one of the biggest success stories of modern medicine.

Vaccines

Vaccines have been one of the biggest success stories of modern medicine. WHO estimates that at least 10 million deaths were prevented between 2010 and 2015 thanks to vaccinations delivered around the world. Many millions more lives were protected from the suffering and disability associated with diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, whooping cough, measles, and polio. Successful immunization programmes also enable national priorities, like education and economic development, to take hold.

Such success builds on a long history of research and innovation, with discovery science producing new product breakthroughs and delivery science carving out ways to reach universal vaccine coverage.

The Expanded Programme on Immunization was born out of success at a time of tremendous optimism about the game-changing potential of vaccines. The Programme was established in 1974 as the world moved closer to smallpox eradication.

Confidence was high that, with international commitment and cooperation, other vaccine-preventable diseases could be conquered. The 1979 certification of smallpox eradication was taken as proof of the power of vaccines to permanently improve the world.

In the decades since, the Expanded Programme on Immunization has remained true to its privileged birthright. It numbers among the most successful of all public health programmes. Since its inception, the Programme has been a pathfinder for universal coverage. In 1974, only 5% of the world's children were protected from the six killer diseases targeted by the Programme. Today, that figure is 86%, with some developing countries reaching more than 95% immunization coverage.

In the era of sustainable development, immunization programmes have matured to the point that they can now serve as a model and a platform for delivering other priority public health interventions. This broadened role has been amply demonstrated by the global initiative to eradicate polio.