



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

eCommons@AKU

---

Medical College Documents

Medical College, Pakistan

---

6-2-2021

## Rebuilding trust on routine immunization in era of COVID-19 fear- role that civil society organizations can play hands-in-hand with immunization program

Ameer Muhammad

Daniyaal Ahmad

Eleze Tariq

Yasir Shafiq

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan\\_fhs\\_mc\\_mc](https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_mc)



Part of the [Immune System Diseases Commons](#), [Immunology and Infectious Disease Commons](#), and the [Virus Diseases Commons](#)

---



# Rebuilding Trust on Routine Immunization in Era of COVID-19 Fear–Role that Civil Society Organizations can Play Hands-in-Hand with Immunization Program

Ameer Muhammad<sup>1</sup>, Daniyaal Ahmad<sup>2</sup>, Eleze Tariq<sup>2</sup> and Yasir Shafiq<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>VITAL Pakistan Trust, Karachi, Pakistan, <sup>2</sup>Medical College, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan

**Keywords:** COVID-19, routine immunization, CSOs, demand, improving coverage

To the Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted the health and socioeconomic condition of this symbiotic globe [1]. The aforementioned impact as well as the one on quality of life has been much more devastating for developing countries, such as the ones supported by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) [4]. All GAVI-supported countries pledged to achieve 100 percent of immunization but one in every 10 children globally still has no access to vaccines, leaving millions of zero-dose children behind [6]. Where the supply-side in these countries is struggling to deliver vaccination services after COVID-19, the demand is facing “double burden” now. Communities often harbor lots of “myths and misconceptions” pertaining to vaccines and vaccination services [7]. The exacerbation of existing fear within communities to access vaccination services and anxiety among frontline health workers to safely deliver vaccination present as key hurdles, reflected by a much smaller number of children being vaccinated in this period [8–10]. The consequences of this have been compounded by restrictions on movement, suspension of public transport, and concerns about exposure to COVID-19. At the same time, the health workforce is absent from their duties either due to travel restrictions, self-quarantine, sickness, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and concerns about COVID-19 exposure [11, 12].

There is a resultant visible impact seen on immunization services such as the 52.8% decrease in immunization visits seen in the Sindh province, Pakistan. This translated into around 2,734 missed children daily only in Karachi, the most populous city of Sindh province. These missed children are at the highest risk of developing VPDs [13]. Many immunization campaigns like “polio and zero dose” were or are still suspended in countries including Pakistan, and bring about a risk of spread of these VPDs and consequent morbidity and mortality [14, 15].

Currently, countries are lifting lockdown restrictions and restoring the health services. However, due to the unpredictability of the situation and decrease in vaccination coverage, exceptional strategies are needed. Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) alone cannot compensate for the loss of missed children so far and months of effort are required to reach the point where we were before COVID-19. Integrated systems and synergy across the partners are a need of the hour. In some semblance of hope, Pakistan has an existing infrastructure of CSOs which operate as the key players in delivering

**Abbreviations:** CSO, civil society organization; EPI, Expanded program on immunization; GAVI, Global alliance for vaccines and immunization; PCCHI, Pakistan CSOs coalition for health and immunization; VPD, vaccine preventable diseases.

## OPEN ACCESS

### Edited by:

Raquel Lucas,  
 University Porto, Portugal

### \*Correspondence:

Yasir Shafiq  
 yasir.shafiq@vitalpakistantrust.org

### Specialty section:

This article was submitted to,  
 a section of the journal *Public Health Reviews*

**Received:** 21 January 2021

**Accepted:** 12 May 2021

**Published:** 02 June 2021

### Citation:

Muhammad A, Ahmad D, Tariq E and Shafiq Y (2021) Rebuilding Trust on Routine Immunization in Era of COVID-19 Fear–Role that Civil Society Organizations can Play Hands-in-Hand with Immunization Program. *Public Health Rev* 42:1603989. doi: 10.3389/phrs.2021.1603989

vaccination—playing major roles at both the supply—as well as the demand-side [16]. The role of these organizations in the response is integral as they are the last-mile players to reach the community's needs, playing a pivotal role in containing endemic illnesses at the community level, averting cases through community mobilization and awareness, and acting at the front line in case detection and referrals. They also advocate with and hold the government, private sector, and development partners accountable for delivering to the most vulnerable [17, 18].

CSOs are thus potential frontline community players to delivering key messages related to COVID-19 and the emerging risk of VPDs in communities [19]. CSOs can fill the current gaps created in service provision and help in reconstructing the trust which vaccination services may have lost in terms of demand in hard-to-reach, vulnerable, and marginalized populations [20, 21]. They usually operate as an independent entity, granting them adjustable and contextual flexibility when working for the communities during the COVID-19 crisis. With having appropriate institutional support and already being trusted partners of the communities through cross sectoral intervention and integrated approaches, they harbor incredible potential in fulfilling this role [22–24].

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extreme condition and warrants the need of a supportive system for routine immunizations across the globe. The synergy between CSOs and the government needs to be established through the recognition of the contribution which these players can provide during this critical time and help the EPI programs to cover its losses. There are platforms available such as “Pakistan CSOs Coalition for Health and Immunization (PCCHI)”-a network of around 80 organizations working

together on health and immunization in Pakistan. This forum has great power to aid in community mobilization, research, advocacy, awareness raising, demand generation, monitoring, and service delivery [25]. This unified action of formal CSO engagement and cohesive approach can help us reach those children who were missed, and supply them with the appropriate dose of vaccine, possibly preventing a lot of non-COVID-19 deaths which are attributable to VPDs. Data has suggested that; “For every one excess Covid-19 death attributable to SARS-CoV-2 infections acquired during routine vaccination clinic visits could be around 140 (37–549) and these deaths in children may be prevented by sustaining routine childhood immunization in Africa” [26]. Due to the significant impact in saving lives, there is a strong and urgent need for building these engagements and taking CSOs onboard who can work with the EPI program hand-in-hand, for the betterment of our communities and our children.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YS and AM conceptualized, analyzed, and prepared the manuscript. ET and DA helped in the preparation of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## REFERENCES

- Nicola, M, Alsafi, Z, Sohrabi, C, Kerwan, A, Al-Jabir, A, Iosifidis, C, et al. The Socio-Economic Implications of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19): A Review. *Int J Surg* (2020). 78:185–93. doi:10.1016/j.ijsu.2020.04.018
- Worldometers. COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic. [Accessed: September 27, 2020].
- Maliszewska, M, Mattoo, A, and Van Der Mensbrugge, D. *The Potential Impact of COVID-19 on GDP and Trade: A Preliminary Assessment*.
- Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Covid-19 Situation Report #18 (September 24, 2020). [Accessed: September 27, 2020].
- World Health Organization. *Ten Years in Public Health, 2007–2017: Report by Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization (2017).
- Alliance, GA. The GAVI Alliance 2019 Annual Progress Report. (2019). [Accessed: September 27, 2020].
- Butt, M, Mohammed, R, Butt, E, Butt, S, and Xiang, J. Why Have Immunization Efforts in Pakistan Failed to Achieve Global Standards of Vaccination Uptake and Infectious Disease Control? *Rmhp* (2020). 13: 111–24. doi:10.2147/rmhp.s211170
- Coker, M, Folayan, MO, Michelou, IC, Oladokun, RE, Torbunde, N, and Sam-Agudu, NA. Things Must Not Fall Apart: the Ripple Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Sub-saharan Africa. *Pediatr Res* (2020). 1–9. doi:10.1038/s41390-020-01174-y
- Saso, A, Skirrow, H, and Kampmann, B. Impact of COVID-19 on Immunization Services for Maternal and Infant Vaccines: Results of a Survey Conducted by Imprint-The Immunising Pregnant Women and Infants Network. *Vaccines* (2020). 8(3):556. doi:10.3390/vaccines8030556
- Paul, E, Steptoe, A, and Fancourt, D. Attitudes towards Vaccines and Intention to Vaccinate against COVID-19: Implications for Public Health Communications. *Lancet Reg Health-Eur*. (2020). 1, 100012. doi:10.1016/j.lanpe.2020.100012
- Raza, A, Matloob, S, Abdul Rahim, NF, Abdul Halim, H, Khattak, A, Ahmed, NH, et al. Factors Impeding Health-Care Professionals to Effectively Treat Coronavirus Disease 2019 Patients in Pakistan: A Qualitative Investigation. *Front Psychol* (2020). 11:572450. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.572450
- Ahmed, J, Malik, F, Bin Arif, T, Majid, Z, Chaudhary, MA, Ahmad, J, et al. Availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Among US and Pakistani Doctors in COVID-19 Pandemic. *Cureus* (2020). 12(6):e8550. doi:10.7759/cureus.8550
- Chandir, S, Siddiqi, DA, Setayesh, H, and Khan, AJ. Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Routine Immunisation in Karachi, Pakistan. *Lancet Glob Health* (2020). 8(9):e1118–e1120. doi:10.1016/s2214-109x(20)30290-4
- Rana, MS, Usman, M, Alam, MM, Ikram, A, Zaidi, SS, Salman, M, et al. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Measles Surveillance in Pakistan. *J Infect* (2020). 82(3):414–451. doi:10.1016/j.jinf.2020.10.008
- Source: *VPD Surveillance Bulletins for Sindh and Punjab. EPI-MIS for All Provinces and Areas*
- Owais, A, Khowaja, AR, Ali, SA, and Zaidi, AKM. Pakistan's Expanded Programme on Immunization: an Overview in the Context of Polio Eradication and Strategies for Improving Coverage. *Vaccine* (2013). 31(33): 3313–9. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2013.05.015
- Nnaji, CA, Owoyemi, AJ, Amaechi, UA, Wiyeh, AB, Ndwandwe, DE, and Wiysonge, CS. Taking Stock of Global Immunisation Coverage Progress: the Gains, the Losses and the Journey Ahead. *Int Health* (2020). 11:ihz120. doi:10.1093/inthealth/ihz120
- Omungo, PA. A Review of the Role of Civil Society in Advocacy and Lobbying for Enforcement of Health Policy in Kenya. *Afr Popul Stud* (2011). 25(1): 77–91. doi:10.11564/25-1-257

19. World Health Organization. *Positioning Demand Generation in National EPI Planning and Implementation Process: A Quick Guide to Assist Immunization and Communication Planners and Managers*.
20. Nixon, N. *Civil Society in Southeast Asia during COVID-19: Responding and Evolving under Pressure*.
21. Andrus, JK, and Perry, HB. Community Engagement, Ownership, and Civil Society Organizations in Polio Eradication. *Am J Trop Med Hyg* (2019). 101(4 Suppl):1–3. doi:10.4269/ajtmh.19-0529
22. World Health Organization. *Engagement of private/nongovernmental health providers in immunization service delivery: Considerations for National Immunization Programmes*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization (2017).
23. Masud, T, and Navaratne, V. *The Expanded Program on Immunization in Pakistan. Recommendations for Improving Performance. Health, Nutrition and Population (HNP) Discussion Paper*. Washington, DC: The World Bank (2012).
24. Kankya, C, Akandinda, A, and Rwabukwali, CB. The Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Healthcare Delivery System: A Case Study of Child Immunisation in Kabarole District, Uganda. *Health* (2013). 5(8):1277–1288. doi:10.4236/health.2013.58174
25. Ngara, CO. *Public Health Activism and the Role of Civil Society in Good Governance: Some Reflections on the Nigerian Experience*.
26. Abbas, K, Procter, SR, van Zandvoort, K, Clark, A, Funk, S, Mengistu, T, et al. Routine childhood immunisation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa: a benefit-risk analysis of health benefits versus excess risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection. *Lancet Glob Health* (2020). 8(10):e1264–72. doi:10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30308-9

Copyright © 2021 Muhammad, Ahmad, Tariq and Shafiq. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

**PHR is edited by the Swiss School of Public Health (SSPH+) in a partnership with the Association of Schools of Public Health of the European Region (ASPHER)+**