



Preparing the frontline for the COVID-19 vaccine rollout: Learning from the past
Executive Summary - January 2021



Introduction

It's a race against time to vaccinate the world. COVID-19 vaccines offer hope for countries within the Asia Pacific region but there are many challenges to a successful rollout including geographical barriers, limited resources and vaccine hesitancy.

A webinar, organised by the BMJ, Asian Development Bank and UNICEF, explored what could be learned from previous mass vaccination campaigns within the Asia Pacific region.

Attendees from over 20 countries heard that an effective COVID-19 vaccine rollout needs sectors to work together with healthcare workers who are fully supported with the appropriate information, skills and training.

“If we do not educate households and communities and they have the wrong information then we can have the best vaccines in the world but people will not take them. Focussing on the community is extremely important.”

Dr Patrick L. Osewe:
Chief of Health Sector Group,
Asian Development Bank

Key past vaccination learning messages:

Move swiftly to get a halal fatwa

Indonesia faced widespread vaccine refusal when they started the phase 2 measles-rubella childhood vaccine campaign in 2018. Although the Indonesian Ulema Council stated that the vaccine is permissible for the greater public health good, the fact that it was haram still impacted the campaign. The country has learnt a key lesson from this experience ensuring the Sinovac's COVID-19 vaccine was safe as well as halal.

Use real-time monitoring

Indonesia's success in the measles-rubella vaccination programme was partly down to the availability of real-time coverage data. RapidPro, a mobile health monitoring tool, allows frontline healthcare workers to easily and quickly submit daily reports on vaccinations in their local area. The data are then uploaded to a dashboard allowing the rapid identification of areas that need to be targeted for follow-up programmes. Real-time monitoring also improves the accuracy of data which is vital to track who has had first and second doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“For COVID-19 mass vaccination in large populations, real-time monitoring can improve data accuracy and enable follow up actions that are needed to be carried out immediately.”

Ms Lulu Ariyanthy Dewi, Epidemiologist, Immunization Sub-Directorate, Ministry of Health Indonesia

Pool resources

Pacific Island countries and territories are spread over a vast geographic area and have small populations, which require a relatively small volume of vaccines. To overcome these challenges, countries work together with their vaccine orders under UNICEF's Vaccine Independence Initiative and procure in a pooled manner. This increases their purchasing power within the vaccine market, heightens their vaccine security and improves value for money in such a geographically challenging environment.

Think creatively to overcome logistical challenges

There are many challenges to be overcome in distributing vaccines. The military or the private sector may be able to help with the logistics of distribution. Drones are a possibility in, particularly remote communities. Setting up centralised cold-chain vaccine hubs is vital; as the Pacific Island countries and territories have done.

Bring in experts to communicate the case for vaccines

The Philippines has long-standing low immunisation rates. This is partly due to a controversy surrounding the dengue vaccine, Dengvaxia, which led to mistrust of government officials and accusations of a lack of transparency. Allowing experts from a trusted institution, such as the Philippine General Hospital to take the lead in communicating messages, rather than politicians, has helped to rebuild trust in vaccines.

Build trust through transparency and consistency

Consistent, clear and transparent communication is imperative to win the trust of the public and to help deal with rumours and disinformation. Governments and health bodies must make it clear which populations will be prioritised for vaccination, how vaccines will be allocated equitably and the efficacy and risk profile of vaccines.

Engage with local religious groups and community organisations

Misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine spreads rapidly through social media and word of mouth. Getting religious groups and community organisations onside to help dispel peoples' concerns and disseminate accurate information is crucial in the battle against vaccine hesitancy.

Work with other sectors

Cross-sector working is key for a successful COVID-19 vaccine rollout. The military has strong logistical capabilities and can help deliver the vaccine to hard to reach communities. The private sector, the energy sector and social care sector can also help to play a part.

Preserve routine childhood vaccine supply

With the current focus on COVID-19 vaccination programmes, there are fears that progress on reducing childhood deaths through immunisations could be reversed. It is important to ensure that routine childhood vaccines supply chains are preserved. Resources put in place for the COVID-19 vaccine should also be used for other vaccine programmes.

Support frontline health workers with training and information

Frontline healthcare workers have a vital role to play in communicating evidence-based information to patients, carers and the general public which can help dispel myths and misinformation about the pandemic. In order to help them, BMJ and Asian Development Bank launched an online Coronavirus (Covid-19) Information Centre which provides free access to the latest evidence-based guidelines and tools for the diagnosis and management of COVID-19.

“It is important to be interdisciplinary in our approach; involving social scientists, communication experts and, of course, getting community input on how best to rollout vaccination. Communication has to be consistent and has to be targeted in terms of language and messages.”

Dr Gideon Lasco, Senior Lecturer,
University of the Philippines

Q&A session:

Attendees from all around the world posed valuable questions to the panel on strategies to enhance deployment, encourage vaccine acceptance and work in partnership to reach communities at scale.

The main themes included:

- **Prioritising populations**
- **Vaccination deployment partners**
- **Vaccine efficacy**
- **Vaccine safety**
- **Vaccine hesitancy**
- **Rollout schedules**

As part of the BMJ and ADB partnership, more webinars will take place and cover the critical issues faced by frontline healthcare workers in the pandemic.

About the BMJ and ADB partnership

BMJ and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched the [COVID-19 \(coronavirus\): ADB Information Centre](#) to support frontline health professionals manage patients with COVID-19, its relevant differential diagnosis and common comorbidities in real-time, at the point of care.

The Information Centre provides free access to digital health tools such as clinical decision support from BMJ Best Practice, accredited e-learning courses from BMJ Learning as well as patient information leaflets and procedural videos. Evidence on COVID-19 is rapidly changing and frontline healthcare professionals can benefit from trusted, evidence-based and continually updated international guidelines.

“We need partnership and perseverance. A lot of collaboration is needed. If we keep at it and put our heads together we will find a way through”

Ms Wendy Erasmus, Chief of Child Survival and Development, UNICEF Pacific Islands