

Evaluation: European Immunization Week

2009



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**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR

Europe



European
Immunization
Week

Prevent Protect Immunize

In 2009, WHO estimated that hundreds of thousands of people in the European Region had not been fully immunized. As part of efforts to strengthen national immunization systems and raise public awareness of immunization, the WHO Regional Office for Europe leads and coordinates European Immunization Week (EIW). For one week in each spring, this regional initiative unites countries from across the Region under the EIW slogan: “Prevent. Protect. Immunize”.

The fourth EIW was held on 20–26 April 2009 with 37 European Member States participating, including 7 that joined the initiative for the first time (see map). EIW 2009 focused on increasing public awareness of the benefits of immunization, and the Regional Office used innovative Internet-based techniques to help achieve this goal.

This evaluation of EIW 2009 is based on an online survey sent to focal points from the 37 participating Member States (with a 100% response rate), and an assessment of online activities by an external consultant.

“EIW 2009 goes online – join us!”

With these animated words, the Regional Office launched its online activities for EIW 2009. The initiative was spearheaded by a memorable and provocative animated YouTube video that spread the EIW message virally and led online traffic to an informative web site, which featured a statement of support from Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Mary of Denmark (Patron of the Regional Office). Social networking sites such as Facebook, VKontakte and StudiVZ were also used to share the message. The use of new media – groundbreaking for the Regional Office – was designed to counter misinformation about vaccination spread via the Internet, and sought to use the media that have been dominated by anti-vaccination groups.

While Member States’ reactions to the video varied, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive; 7 of the 37 participating countries used the video directly in their EIW campaigns. These countries reported positive responses from their target groups. Other comments emphasized that the video would have been more effective if it had been available in languages besides English or if countries had been able to translate it into their own languages.

Some respondents said that, while the video was appropriate for parents and students, it was less helpful for health professionals. In addition, limited access to computers and the Internet made the video less useful in some settings.

Main goals of EIW:

- To raise public awareness about the importance of immunization
- To highlight the benefits of immunization
- To support national immunization systems
- To provide a framework for mobilizing public and political support for efforts to protect the public through universal childhood immunization



The video “WHO: Prevent. Protect. Immunize” The Regional Office released video on 21 April 2009.

- During its first two weeks on YouTube, the video had 10 100 views, making it the most frequently watched online WHO video to date.
- The video was spotlighted on YouTube and highlighted on its “most viewed” and “most popular” categories on 24 April 2009.
- It generated more than 4000 visits to the EIW campaign web site, more than 7 times the number of visits during EIW 2008.
- The campaign resulted in active social media commenting, on both YouTube and the micro-blogging tool Twitter.
- It generated online discussions and was highlighted on more than 17 blogs across Europe.
- The video and linked web site continued to raise awareness of EIW and immunization after the campaign, with 50–200 additional views per day.

◀ Seminar in the Czech Republic with both national and regional immunization experts
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▶ A woman in Azerbaijan receives a vaccine during field immunizations
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Country Activities

Activities implemented by Member States varied widely and included media events, political debates, training for health staff, exhibitions, workshops with parents and art competitions for children. One third of countries carried out vaccination activities among target groups. Turkey, for example, launched a catch-up campaign for children aged under 5 years. In Hungary, children aged under 2 received pneumococcal vaccine, while France and Switzerland focused on measles vaccination. Other countries, such as Albania and Armenia, focused on introducing new vaccines into their national routine immunization schedules. Campaigns in Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Tajikistan and Turkey included door-to-door visits to vulnerable groups.

Most countries focused their efforts on vulnerable populations, including Roma and migrant communities, while others addressed the general population, seeking to raise awareness of vaccination safety and the importance of immunization. Other important themes for EIW included educating health staff, medical students and teachers; and creating support for and increasing knowledge about immunization among politicians and decision-makers.

Example: Cyprus

Cyprus used an unconventional method to identify undervaccinated children by using immunization records in the public sector and targeted communication. A review of vaccination records identified children who had not received all the recommended doses, and personal telephone calls were made to each of their families, encouraging them to complete the children's vaccinations. The activity was seen as very effective in informing and motivating parents.

Partners in EIW

A number of partners were involved in both planning and running EIW 2009 activities. Of the 37 participating countries, 30 involved their health ministries in the planning phase, and half succeeded in involving the mass media to raise awareness of immunization and EIW activities. Other partners included medical associations, other government ministries, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other United Nations agencies, and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.



Participating countries in EIW 2009:

Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.



What countries did

The Regional Office encouraged all participating countries to start planning their EIW activities at an early stage. Countries began planning their campaigns, on average, 3–4 months before implementation. Twenty-five countries established working groups consisting primarily of health care staff and representatives from health ministries. As part of the planning of EIW 2009, most countries reported identifying key target groups and key barriers to immunization, and most countries developed either a strategy or a plan of action.

Barriers to immunization identified in EIW planning

- Difficulty in reaching specific population groups
- Parents' lack of knowledge
- Distrust in vaccines
- Confusion due to mixed messages about the safety and necessity of vaccination
- Lack of interest from decision-makers
- Unbalanced media coverage of immunization

Success

Participating countries generally considered EIW 2009 to have been a positive event. A full 90% of countries considered the campaign a complete or partial success. Of the 37 participating countries, 18 reported fully implementing their plans of action and another 8, partial implementation. Reported reasons for less successful campaigns and problems with implementation included: overlap with Easter holidays, changes of plan due to changes of government, pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza, late cancellations and lack of funding.

Impact on immunization coverage and awareness

One third of participating countries reported increases in routine immunization coverage following EIW 2009, and 19 countries reported being confident that coverage would increase in the targeted subpopulations. No respondents, however, believed that EIW would have a long-term impact on vaccine coverage in their countries, showing the need for a strong initiative each year.

Countries reported that their campaigns were effective in:

1. garnering media attention;
2. increasing knowledge about immunization among target groups;
3. motivating parents and caregivers to vaccinate their children; and
4. creating interest in and support for immunization among decision-makers.

Of the participating Member States, 18 confirmed that their EIW activities raised awareness of the benefits of immunization. This kind of assessment is not straightforward, however, as shown by 14 countries' reporting that they could not accurately report on the initiative's effectiveness.



▲ Children in Tirana, Albania at an immunization awareness event
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Lessons learned

- Early planning is crucial; the Regional Office should contact countries during the autumn and encourage them to begin planning EIW activities 4–6 months before implementing the initiative during the following spring.
- EIW working groups in countries need continuity. Such groups should ideally include at least two members who have participated in previous EIWs.
- WHO staff should stay in regular contact with Extended Programme of Immunization (EPI) managers/EIW focal points, to share new information and provide suggestions and tools for improving EIW plans and strategies.

Conclusion

EIW 2009 had a positive impact on the targeted groups in all the participating countries and achieved its main goal: to raise public awareness and highlight the benefits of immunization. Nevertheless, this success does not negate the need for new innovations and enhancements in EIW in the years to come.

Key outcomes of EIW 2009

- 90% of countries considered EIW 2009 a complete or partial success.
- In more than half of the countries, EIW 2009 helped raise awareness of the benefits of immunization.
- More than 60 000 people in specific target groups in 11 countries were immunized during the campaigns.
- 70% of countries considered the technical support from the Regional Office to be sufficient.
- 85% of respondents recommended continuing their countries' participation in EIW.