Background Q&A

1. New estimates, published on November 12 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), show that 207,500 people, mostly children, lost their lives to measles in 2019, as deaths surged by nearly 50% around the world compared to 2016. Young children are most at risk from the disease. Estimates also show that reported measles cases worldwide increased to nearly 870,000 in 2019, the highest number reported since 1996.

   In 2019, 9 of 184 (4.9%) reporting countries (CAR, DRC, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, North Macedonia, Samoa, Tonga, and Ukraine) had measles incidence exceeding 500 per million. These countries accounted for 631,847 (73%) of all reported cases in 2019.

2. These estimates come as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the delivery and uptake of vital vaccinations, which will undoubtedly lead to drops in vaccine coverage. Despite strong recommendations for safely resuming of routine immunization services, fewer children have been immunized and catch up will be needed. Without urgent action now to safely restart and revitalize vaccinations to catch-up on missed doses, we could potentially see another significant increase in measles cases and deaths in 2021.

3. In response to this urgent crisis, the Measles & Rubella Initiative (M&RI) is working closely with global partners and health ministries to help prevent and respond to outbreaks in the immediate and long term. This includes:

   ● The WHO-UNICEF Joint Emergency Call to Action (launched November 6), calling for US$255 in emergency funds specifically for measles to support urgent outbreak response in all regions around the world.
   
   ● Additionally, M&RI is launching a new, bold strategy for the next decade, the Measles and Rubella Strategic Framework, to catalyze action towards accelerating progress on addressing stagnating measles vaccine coverage by bolstering strong, national immunization systems that can reach and protect children. This strategic shift by the partnership will focus on strengthening the routine delivery of all vaccines, and quickly and effectively detecting and responding to global measles outbreaks.

4. That anyone should die from measles – against which a safe, effective and affordable vaccine has existed for over 50 years – is a collective failure which must be addressed.
5. Vaccination provides the best defence against measles and other diseases. All countries should aim to build and sustain high measles vaccination rates of 95% or more to protect the health of their populations.

MEASLES DATA and M&RI RESPONSE

- There were over **207,500 avoidable deaths** from measles in 2019 – **a 50% increase since 2016** – as cases rose in every region around the world.
- **Estimated measles cases are nearly 9.8 million.** This figure is estimated using modelling to account for what we know are underreported actual cases. In 2019, there were **869,770 reported cases.**
- Most deaths from measles are of children aged under 5 years of age. Babies and young children are especially vulnerable to complications from the disease.
- Measles outbreaks have severe impacts on individuals, families, communities and health systems.
- Given disruptions to immunization services because of the COVID-19 pandemic, gaps in vaccine coverage are likely to widen. These could result in potential increases in measles cases and deaths are anticipated for 2021 unless campaigns are urgently restarted.
- As of November, more than 94 million people were at risk of missing vaccines due to paused measles campaigns. Of the countries with planned 2020 campaigns, only eight (Brazil, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, and Somalia) resumed their campaigns after initial delays. Today, more than 94 million children in 26 countries are still at risk of missing the measles vaccine though delayed 2020 campaigns. Of those 26, 13 countries are experiencing ongoing measles outbreaks.
- The report, released this week, shows backsliding in the progress towards reducing cases and deaths from measles since historic lows reported in 2016. Report authors cite a failure to vaccinate children on time with two doses of measles-containing vaccine as the main driver of these increases.

The Measles & Rubella Initiative (M&RI) is playing an essential role in responding to measles outbreaks around the world, but funding constraints challenge the response.

- With governments and partners including Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, M&RI is supporting countries to identify and address causes of low coverage, strengthen routine immunization, and stop outbreaks.
- WHO and UNICEF have launched an Emergency Call to Action for urgent funding to support measles and polio outbreak response in non-Gavi eligible countries. The
combined ask for US$655 million, $400 million for polio and $255 million for measles, that will enable partners to urgently respond to outbreaks of two highly-contagious diseases, which is essential to avoid further casualties and alleviate overburdened health systems. The Emergency Call to Action sets the stage for us to be working differently in a more integrated manner moving forward.

- For measles specifically, funds will be used over three years to respond to ongoing measles outbreaks in every region around the world. WHO and partners have developed a comprehensive **Measles Outbreak Strategic Response Plan (MOSRP)**, which will be published in December 2020. This plan outlines a coordinated global and regional approach for outbreak prevention, preparedness and response. The funding appeal corresponds to components of the MOSRP which are not currently funded with existing donors, such as generous support from Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

  Specifically:

  - US$29 million will be used for coordination and preparedness interventions for 45 high-risk countries (24 Gavi eligible, 21 non-Gavi-eligible) e.g., technical assistance, risk communications, and community engagement.

  - US$47 million will be used for measles outbreak response activities in non-Gavi eligible countries, as well as incident management support teams, after-action reviews, rapid convenience monitoring, and case management for Grade 2 or Grade 3 outbreaks.

  - US$179 million will be used for preventive vaccination activities for 21 non-Gavi-eligible high-risk countries.

- M&RI is also launching a new, bold strategy to address measles around the world over the next decade. The **Measles & Rubella Strategic Framework (MRSF)**, developed through an extensive consultative and collaborative process, aims to strengthen routine immunization through a unified, integrated approach to achieve a world free from measles and rubella.

- The MRSF aims to:
  - Increase measles vaccine coverage;
  - Reduce gaps in access to vaccines (also known as immunity gaps);
  - Implement more effective and efficient supplementary immunization;
  - Detect and respond to outbreaks timely and effectively; and
○ Improve surveillance and immunization data to help guide decisions.

These actions will accelerate progress towards achieving and sustaining measles and rubella elimination. The M&RI will be responsible for oversight and coordination, including global level advocacy and resource mobilization, coordination of technical support, and monitoring and evaluation of the MRSF.

**Given ongoing setbacks and anticipated increases in measles cases and mortality in 2021 as a result of service disruption due to COVID-19, there is a larger need than ever to focus on both urgent outbreak response and long-term solutions.**

- We must move from putting out fires – responding to outbreak after outbreak – to being better protected against the disease. That is why a long-term integrated strategy, the MRSF, as well as the MOSRP for outbreak response and prevention, have been developed.

- When it comes to measles, the best preparedness is strong immunization coverage and access to vaccination services throughout life. Yet, first dose measles vaccination coverage globally stands at 85%; second dose coverage, while increasing, is at 71%. This is well below the 95% two-dose coverage needed to prevent outbreaks.

- It is unjust that mortality rates vary so significantly depending on the country in which you live. M&RI is supporting countries to strengthen surveillance to ensure cases are detected quickly to stop outbreaks.