Theory of change in action: the WHO immunization Scholar programme

A network 15,000 strong and growing fast
90 countries 23 cohorts up to 400 per cohort
1/3 from the district level
Completion rates up to 95%

How WHO turns guidelines into action

The World Health Organization’s technical experts produce global guidance to support countries. Using the Scholar package, we supported immunization staff in English, French, and Spanish – from the districts to the national team in the capital – to take this guidance and turn it into action. The Scholar team manages the entire process, keeping it simple for the subject matter experts and partners.

The World Health Organization’s Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) has used the Scholar package since 2016.

Scholars adapt and apply WHO’s global guidelines to their own contexts, with the structured input of both global experts and peers. Successful participants leave the course with their own context-specific, peer-reviewed action plans.

In the first two years of the programme, some participants reported implementing their course projects without any post-course support.

Using the WHO guidance for routine immunization, this Scholar, an immunization officer for a global partner of a country in the Pacific, identified a need to develop a culture of supportive supervision, as training alone was not achieving the desired outcomes. He developed a series of tailored strategies to identify and reach under-vaccinated and unvaccinated persons and to regularly and systematically build capacity in vaccinators and district managers. He then presented this course project to the Minister of Health. When we spoke to him two years later, he was able to describe how implementation of his project was one significant action that contributed to an improvement in both quality of service and immunization coverage.

“I was skeptical that a digital intervention could actually help practitioners become fit for purpose. Seeing Scholars dedicate inordinate amounts of time to learning and collaboration has made me a convert – and convinced me to partner with the Scholar programme.”

David Koffi, ADS Conseil, GAVI Survey Scholar field-based programme

Working with civil society to find children who have been lost to follow-up

This Scholar, a technical support officer in a West African country, sought to increase immunization performance by finding children lost to follow up, focusing on lower performing districts. The project focused on developing community linkages, working with Civil Society Organizations to outreach communities and to implement household visits by health community workers. Two years on, the Scholar reported that community health workers were now able to locate and vaccinate 99% of the children who were previously lost to follow up.

Source for the two case studies above: Green, W. 2019. Learning from the implementation stories of WHO Scholars: A Qualitative Study.


“Just producing a guideline is not enough. We need Scholars to reflect. How can they bring innovation into the current system to offer better immunization services in the communities they serve and reach all children, be it in remote areas, urban slums, or other hard to reach situations?”

Dr Katherine O’Brien, Director, Department of Immunization, Vaccines & Biologicals, WHO

“...You are doing magic”

Molly Abbruzzese, Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Muhammed Imran Qureshi advises the Pakistani immunization programme for WHO. States within the province experience wide disparities in coverage. In his first Scholar project, Dr Qureshi identified a transformative investment to build the capacity of EPI supervisors to develop management skills covering training, culture and processes, and staff motivation, with individualized, specific goals for each State.

He then contributed to the plan’s implementation over a period of 3 years in which time Fully Immunized Child coverage in the PDHS Survey increased from 67% (2012-13) to 80% (2017) and DTP containing coverage increased from 76% (PDHS 2012-13) to 89% (PDHS 2017-18).

“I was very happy that we achieved these wonderful results, increasing coverage from 76% to 89%.”

Muhammed Imran Qureshi, Scholar Alumni leader for Pakistan

“After my first Scholar course, I reviewed the data from a measles campaign I had participated in. I could see new problems as well as potential solutions. I want to use my new capabilities to improve my country’s immunization programme.”

Gift (Ettentuk) Aniyom, Scholar Alumni leader for Nigeria

By observing new forms of leadership that first emerged organically, we co-created and nurtured the Accompanists and the Impact Accelerator to strengthen support to Scholars, during and after courses.

When we ran the first pilot in 2016, I was surprised by the high level of engagement from country-based participants – and hoped that this would lead to more than training.”

Jhilmil Bahl, Capacity Building Officer, WHO

Accompanists

In our first cohorts, we observed that experienced participants offered support to new Scholars.

In response, the Scholar Team invited these volunteers to become ‘Accompanists’, creating a powerful, scalable volunteer web of support. Half of each new cohort commits to ‘accompany’ others. Initially strangers, Accompanists and Scholars may be halfway across the world from each other, but quickly form a close-knit team.

Furthermore, Scholars who receive Accompanist support are more likely – if their organization supports them – to apply what they gained from the programme, even when faced with significant challenges. This finding surprised us, given that Accompanist support is offered only during the course.

Impact Accelerator

“Learners became leaders and facilitators. In some countries, they are taking on the issues that matter to them, turning course projects into an agenda for change.”

Ian Steed, volunteering adviser

In a few countries, Scholars self-initiated informal, motivated groups of professionals operating across agencies, to transform ideas into collaborative project implementation.

Observing these voluntary dynamics, we saw potential for systemic change – and immediately convened Scholars to develop a new system to support this across the network, leading less than six months later to the creation of the Impact Accelerator in 55 countries and of country groups in 24 of them.
