UNICEF IMMUNIZATIONS

The ongoing story of the drive for full immunization is one of many formidable challenges and spectacular successes.

The good news is that immunization has saved over 20 million lives in the last two decades. Immunization rates for the six major vaccine-preventable diseases – pertussis, childhood tuberculosis, tetanus, polio, measles and diphtheria – have risen from under 10 per cent in the 1970s to nearly 75 per cent today. Polio is on the verge of eradication. Deaths from measles, a major killer, declined nearly two-thirds in the last decade. Immunization against tetanus saved hundreds of thousands of mothers and newborns, and 104 of 161 developing countries have eliminated the disease altogether.

Distribution of high-dose vitamin A capsules has averted at least 1 million child deaths since 1998. (Vitamin A deficiency is a major cause of blindness and a contributing factor to childhood deaths from measles and diarrhoea.) Recently, newer vaccines, such as those that protect against Hepatitis B, have been introduced into routine health services in more than 40 of the world’s poorest nations.

Yet there have been setbacks. The dramatic increase in global immunization coverage during the 1980s leveled off in the 1990s. Gaps widened both between and within nations, with coverage rates in several African nations dropping to less than 30 per cent.

A quarter of the children born every year – about 34 million infants – are still not protected against diseases for which inexpensive vaccines are available. Measles alone claimed over 770,000 lives in 2001 because children were not immunized with a vaccine costing less than $1 per dose.

And there are many other compelling reason why the battle against infectious diseases must go on.

* Vaccines protect whole communities. Infectious diseases, by definition, spread easily. However, viruses and bacteria can also be stopped in their tracks if enough people are immunized. The more children in a community that are fully immunized against certain diseases, the safer everyone is.
* Diseases can reappear when immunization drops. In Eastern Europe in the 1990s, low immunization rates coupled with economic crises triggered a major epidemic of diphtheria, which killed 30,000 people.  By the time the epidemic was contained, the disease had spread to Finland, Germany and Norway.
* Vaccines are effective.  With the exception of providing safe drinking water, no other health intervention is as effective as immunization for reducing disease and mortality rates.
* Vaccines are affordable. According to the World Bank, immunization and vitamin A supplementation are two of the most cost-effective public health interventions available today. A lack of vitamin A can cause irreversible blindness. But even before blindness occurs, a child deficient in vitamin A faces a 25 per cent greater risk of dying from a range of childhood ailments such as measles, malaria and diarrhoea.  For as little as $20-30, a child can be protected from Vitamin A deficiency and a host of deadly diseases, including diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, measles, childhood tuberculosis, hepatitis B, and Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b), which is a major cause of pneumonia and meningitis.
* Healthy children reduce household spending on health care, the cost of which may be too high for poor families to afford, or may send them into even deeper poverty. Moreover, healthy children mean that parents or other family members are free to work or carry out other productive activities, rather than caring for the sick.
* New vaccines will soon become available. Advances in science and technology mean that vaccines against certain types of diarrhoea and pneumonia will be available in the next five to seven years. Research is also under way on vaccines against HIV/AIDS and malaria, and improved vaccines are being developed against tuberculosis. Strengthening health systems now is essential to ensuring that all children can benefit from these new vaccines once they are approved for use.