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Commentary

Political will and vaccine legislation

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With 86% of the world's children now receiving all three shots of a diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis-containing (DTP3) vaccine, more people have access to more vaccines today than ever before [1]. This has resulted largely from the global health community's partnership with countries, which began with the establishment of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in 1974 and continued in 2000 with the creation of what is now called Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. But with 21 lower-middle-income countries due to transition out of Gavi support between 2016 and 2020, and more to follow, we have entered a new phase in global childhood immunization, where countries must take increasing ownership of programmes to ensure long-term success and sustainability.

The new phase is already under way. From 2008 to 2016, Gavi-supported countries made a six-fold increase in contributions to their national immunization programmes (NIPs), with co-financing increasing from US\$ 21 million to US\$ 133 million. Similarly, between 2011 and 2016, Gavi countries increased government expenditures on routine immunization per live birth by 43% [2]. This progress is encouraging, but there is more work to be done. As more countries assume full funding of their NIPs, they will need to maintain political support for immunization while confronting new challenges, such as vaccine hesitancy and expanding health systems. In this increasingly complex immunization landscape, it is thus important that countries establish a legislative framework to support their programmes.

The establishment of vaccination legislation sends a strong message about the importance of immunization to health and well-being and that investing in health is an element of growing the economy. In this way, vaccination legislation not only demonstrates the link between political will and policy, but can also improve immunization programme performance by including accountability measures alongside of programme goals. This is one reason why this is an important strategic objective of the European and the Global Vaccine Action Plans, EVAP and GVAP, respectively [3,4].

Despite its relevance to these action plans, however, there is little research on vaccination legislation, published or unpublished, both in terms of the approaches and provisions designed to increase immunization coverage. We need to identify which elements of vaccine legislation are effective in sustaining and accelerating progress, and which approaches can bring about legislative change to support immunization programmes. In Latin America, the content of vaccination legislation has been described, and there is evidence of an association between the passing of laws and

increased vaccine spending [5,6]. But the correlation is not well understood.

In this issue, Trumbo et al. highlight the experiences of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova—three countries that have transitioned from Gavi support—and provide insights into the complexities that arise in strengthening legal frameworks for immunization and offer several models for consideration. Ideally, such legal frameworks would serve to make national programmes immune from the vagaries of political support and economic fluctuations. In practice, however, one size does not fit all; many factors influence legislation, and these vary from country to country. Also, even where vaccine legislation does exist, this doesn't guarantee financing of immunization programs as severe economic fluctuations may still influence the allocation of financing which is why political will is still important.

As recommended by the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE), a comprehensive global audit should be undertaken to document the ways in which legislation and regulation have been used to promote or undermine immunization at a national level, to identify how legal and regulatory instruments can be best applied in different contexts and for different purposes to strengthen immunization systems [7]. One step toward this ambitious goal would be to conduct a landscape analysis of current approaches already being employed within a single region. Work by the Sabin Vaccine Institute, funded by Gavi, has shown that such evaluations can influence legal frameworks in developing and transitioning countries. A more sophisticated analysis could enable more countries to share their experiences in passing or modifying legislation, the impact of these laws, and the factors that facilitated or impeded their effectiveness. Most importantly, a better understanding of vaccine legislation might help national officials to make evidence-based decisions on different legal provisions or policies in their countries.

A final consideration relevant to both political will and vaccination is advocacy. Sabin and Gavi are working to educate and equip legislators and other national stakeholders to be more effective advocates for strengthening immunization programmes, because vaccines are one of the most cost-effective interventions with the broadest reach. By providing reliable information about the benefits of immunization, ministry officials and parliamentarians can make evidence-based arguments to strengthen NIPs. These arguments can also help to communicate the important historic role that government leaders may play in the global fight against infectious diseases. Because transitioning out of Gavi support is not

about the end of support, but rather the continued trajectory of increasing ownership and sustainable immunization coverage.

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