Vaccination has been lauded as one of the greatest public health achievements. Smallpox, a human disease, and rinderpest, which affects livestock, were eliminated through vaccination. Currently, several vaccines are given to children and adolescents to prevent a number of childhood diseases, including pneumonia, diarrhoea and measles. There has been a steady rise in immunization coverage over the years and vaccines have become available to many communities and populations, especially deprived communities in the countries of the WHO African Region. There has also been significant progress in the introduction of several new vaccines, including pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV), rotavirus and conjugate meningitis vaccines in the Region. The impact of these new vaccines is being felt. There has been a dramatic decline in the incidence of meningitis due to Neisseria meningitidis serotype A and the Region is on course towards the elimination of meningococcal meningitis A epidemics.

Linked to immunization are the eradication, elimination and control of vaccine-preventable diseases. To achieve this, surveillance for diseases targeted by these vaccines has been strengthened in all countries as part of monitoring disease trends, vaccine impact and progress towards eradication, elimination and control. In the short time since the meningococcal meningitis A vaccine was introduced, in 2010, the epidemiological picture of epidemic meningitis has changed. Through a sustained partnership between the World Health Organization and PATH (Project for Appropriate Technologies for Health) – a non-profit global health innovation organization – the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP) has become a success story in which the new vaccine against meningococcal group A (the predominant cause of epidemic meningitis in the countries of the “meningitis belt”) has been developed and rolled out within 10 years.

These successes have been made possible with the commendable leadership and unwavering commitment of governments and people in the Region and of partners. However, several challenges remain to be addressed. One major challenge is how to ensure equity in access to effective vaccines. There is also the struggle to promote an immunization culture, and place vaccination of the people on government, community and household agendas across the Region.

The comprehensive analysis of the progress made in immunization, status of disease eradication, elimination and control programmes, together with a discussion on the accompanying challenges presented in this special edition is extremely useful and timely. The articles carefully chart the successes and challenges of immunization in the African Region.

This special edition is a call to all stakeholders – governments and people of the African Region as well as partners – to increase efforts at making immunization a way of life across the Region. Governments should continue to make vaccination a top priority and commit adequate resources and communities should appreciate the value of immunization, and demand and protect immunization services as a basic right.

Dr Matshidiso Moeti
WHO Regional Director for Africa

This is a call to all stakeholders – governments and people of the African Region as well as partners – to increase efforts at making immunization a way of life in the WHO African Region.