Policy Brief Issue 1
Strengthening National Health Security through Expanding the Scope of Vaccine Coverage in Nigeria.
1. Introduction/Context

As the new government takes office, it is essential to prioritize national health security, especially in the context of vaccine availability and distribution. Vaccination programs play a crucial role in protecting public health, preventing disease outbreaks, and ensuring the overall well-being of the Nigerian population. The current population of Nigeria is 225,484,207 as of Wednesday, October 25, 2023, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data (1).

Additionally, Nigeria is not immune to global health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the vulnerabilities in its healthcare system and underscored the need for robust health security measures (2).

Despite significant progress in recent years, Nigeria's vaccination coverage has not been optimal due to various factors such as limited access to vaccines in remote areas, low public awareness and vaccine hesitancy, inadequate funding provisions for existing vaccine hub - the Biovaccines to produce vaccines and gaps in the overall healthcare infrastructure.

To achieve increased national health security on vaccines, this policy brief recommends adequate funding provisions for the existing vaccine hub so as to expand the scope of vaccine coverage in Nigeria. By implementing these measures, the government can strengthen the healthcare system, build public trust, and safeguard the country against future health crises.

2. The Challenge

Nigeria has been exposed to many disease epidemics and other public health threats. Nigeria faces numerous health challenges, including infectious diseases, epidemics, and outbreaks. Enhancing national health security through an efficient and robust vaccine program is vital to protect citizens and promote socio-economic development.

This policy brief outlines specific actions that the new government can take to achieve these goals. Nigeria has been exposed to many disease epidemics and other public health threats. Nigeria faces numerous health challenges, including infectious diseases, epidemics, and outbreaks.

1 - https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/
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Nigeria has made considerable strides in expanding its immunization programs, primarily focusing on childhood vaccinations. However, vaccine-preventable diseases continue to pose a major health burden, especially among vulnerable populations. Lack of adequate cold chain storage, transportation challenges, lack of adequate funding, budget allocation and limited accessibility to remote regions have hindered vaccine distribution and delivery.

The recent outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Lassa fever, diphtheria and COVID-19 have highlighted the urgent need for a strong legal framework to guide the response to public health emergencies.

Already, there are series of new public health bills aimed at enhancing the country’s response to public health emergencies and these bills include the Public Health Emergency Bill, which seeks to provide a comprehensive legal framework for managing public health emergencies, and the Amendment of the National Health Act, which seeks to address gaps in the existing legislation that hinder effective response to public health emergencies. In addition, the Port Health Authority Bill is aimed at establishing and strengthening the Port Health Authority, responsible for health security at the country’s borders.

### 3. Recommendations/Proposed Solutions

#### 1. Provision of adequate funding by the government:

Securing adequate funding for a vaccine hub is crucial for its successful operation and sustained contributions to public health and health security. To address the issue of funding for the established vaccine hub in Nigeria, the government can consider the following strategies:

- **Public Investment:** The government should commit substantial public funding to maintain the vaccine hub. This can come from the national budget and should be seen as a long-term investment in public health and national security. Adequate funding should be allocated to research, development, production, and distribution of vaccines.

- **International Partnerships:** Collaborate with international organizations, foundations, and donor agencies. Seek funding and support from organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), Vaccine Alliance etc. which have a track record of supporting vaccine initiatives in developing countries.

- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Form strategic partnerships with pharmaceutical companies, biotech firms, and private healthcare organizations. These partnerships can provide financial support, technical expertise, and infrastructure for vaccine research, development, and production.

- **Regular Review and Adjustment:** There should be continuous monitoring of funding needs and achievements of the vaccine hub; this will help to adjust budget allocations based on evolving requirements and outcomes.
2. Expanding the Scope of Vaccine Coverage:

To increase the overall health security of the nation, the government should expand the scope of vaccine coverage. Immunization and vaccination are two of the most important public health interventions and constitute a cost-effective strategy to reduce both the morbidity and mortality associated with infectious diseases.

The primary objective of the Expanded Vaccine coverage will be to strengthen national health security by improving vaccination coverage and responsiveness to emerging infectious diseases focusing on the following areas:

a. **Priority Vaccines:** Identify and prioritize vaccines based on disease prevalence, potential for outbreaks, and vulnerability of specific populations (e.g., children, elderly, and immunocompromised individuals).

b. **Public Awareness and Advocacy:** The government should implement targeted public awareness campaigns to address vaccine hesitancy and disseminate accurate information about the importance of vaccination. Engage in public awareness campaigns to educate the public about the importance of vaccines and the vaccine hub’s role in public health security.

c. **Expanded Vaccine Distribution Network:** Establishing a well-connected and efficient vaccine distribution network that reaches even the most remote areas of Nigeria. This involves upgrading cold chain infrastructure, enhancing transportation capabilities, and integrating technology for real-time monitoring and stock management.

d. **Strengthening Disease Surveillance and Response:** Integrating the Expanded Vaccine Hub into the existing disease surveillance system, enabling early detection and rapid response to potential outbreaks, thus preventing the spread of infectious diseases.

e. **Research and Development:** Investing in research and development to foster the domestic production of vaccines and vaccine-related technologies. This not only ensures Nigeria’s self-reliance in vaccine procurement but also supports its contributions to global health security efforts.

f. **Vaccine Bonds:** The government should consider issuing vaccine bonds, similar to infrastructure bonds, to raise capital specifically for vaccine research and production. This approach can attract private investors and financial institutions.

3. Building Public Trust and Vaccine Confidence:

Public trust and confidence in vaccines are crucial to achieving high vaccination rates. The government should undertake the following initiatives:

a. **Health Education and Awareness:** Launch nationwide health education campaigns to disseminate accurate information about vaccines, their benefits, and safety.

b. **Engaging Local Leaders:** Collaborate with community leaders, religious institutions, and influential figures to promote vaccine acceptance within their respective communities.

c. **Transparent Communication:** Provide transparent and timely information regarding vaccine availability, distribution plans, and potential side effects to build public confidence.

d. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish an independent body to monitor vaccine safety and effectiveness, ensuring prompt response to any adverse events.

e. **Adequate Funding Provisions:** Increase the health budget to a minimum of 10 per cent within the first year of budget and upgrade it to 15 per cent before the end of four years to enable the country to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC).
Strengthening national health security on vaccines is essential for Nigeria's development and prosperity. Addressing the issue of funding and budget allocation for the 3-Hub project - the vaccine hub in Nigeria will require a strategic and multi-faceted approach.

By implementing these strategies, the Nigerian government can secure funding and allocate budgets effectively for the established vaccine hub.

This will not only enhance public health and national security but also contribute to the global effort to combat infectious diseases and promote healthcare innovation.

Adopting these recommendations will require substantial resources and cooperation among government agencies, private sectors, and civil society. However, the benefits of increased national health security will far outweigh the costs, leading to a healthier, more prosperous Nigeria.
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