

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair and a gold necklace holding a young child with light brown hair in a bun. Both are looking down with their eyes closed. The woman is wearing a black top, and the child is wearing a white tank top. The background is a plain, light color.

Strengthening National Immunization Promotion Capacity in Moldova:

Overcoming barriers and boosting vaccine uptake based on evidence

Context

Over the past decade, the Republic of Moldova has been experiencing a downward trend in vaccination coverage, which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. National vaccination coverage of the first dose of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP1) vaccine dropped from 91 per cent in 2019 to 87 per cent in 2024.¹ A wide range of behavioural drivers – including gaps in knowledge about the benefits of vaccination and misinformation spreading through social media – influence families’ immunization decisions. Additionally, healthcare workers do not consistently provide the same vaccination guidance to families, and training programmes to enhance their immunization-related technical knowledge and counselling skills are not mandatory for all specialties.

Recognizing the need for evidence-based, behavioural science-informed strategies to address the barriers families and healthcare workers face – strategies grounded in deep understanding rather than assumptions – UNICEF worked with partners to strengthen national capacity to design and implement high-quality social and behaviour change (SBC) interventions and policies to create sustainable, systems-level change.

- Highly hesitant parents tended to hold alternative health beliefs – for example, that vaccines interfere with the body’s ability to protect itself from disease – suggesting the need for community engagement approaches involving local leaders, dialogue-based education with healthcare workers, and social listening to address fears and misconceptions.
- Primary healthcare workers were the most trusted information source.

The study informed the country’s first “Social and Behaviour Change for Immunization Plan 2027,” a three-year plan (2025-2027) approved by the Ministry of Health and integrated into the National Immunization Program. The plan outlines a comprehensive set of interventions to influence caregivers to timely vaccinate their children and healthcare workers to consistently recommend timely vaccination at every healthcare interaction.



Interventions

Behavioural Insights Research

In 2023–2024, a comprehensive behavioural insights study on routine immunization helped the country understand the factors influencing people’s immunization choices and practices. Key findings that informed the design of evidence-based interventions included:

- Vaccine hesitancy among parents, especially among older, educated, urban male caregivers, is largely driven by concerns about vaccine safety and efficacy. Parents who are vaccine hesitant either delay or refuse one or more mandatory vaccines.

National SBC Capacity Strengthening

A key intervention included in the 2027 SBC for Immunization Plan was to improve national SBC capacities within the Ministry of Health, the National Agency of Public Health (NAPH) and Nicolae Testemițanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy to support implementation and assessment of the other interventions included in the plan. In May 2025, UNICEF trained 48

public health specialists, medical professionals, communication officers and health media journalists from the Ministry, NAPH, public health institutions and NGOs on evidence-based approaches to behaviour change, including how to design, implement and evaluate interventions. Participants' technical knowledge in SBC improved significantly after the workshop, with the mean score of correct answers increasing from 1.9 to 2.8. Continuous education and training opportunities are important to further deepen their understanding and use of the SBC approaches.

Interpersonal Communication Skills of Diverse Actors

A collaborative group of participants from the Ministry, NAPH and the Nicolae Testemițanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy translated UNICEF's regional training module on interpersonal communication and tailored it to local needs with relevant examples, exercises and case studies. Successful pilot testing in 2022 among healthcare workers in Bălți municipality paved the way to integrate the training modules into pre- and in-service curricula. By the 2024–2025 academic year, the curricula was fully institutionalized across undergraduate, residency and continuing education levels at the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy, as well as in five medical colleges in Bălți, Cahul, Chisinau, Orhei and Ungheni. In addition, in 2025 1,358 school-based medical workers were trained in interpersonal communication, vaccine-related misinformation and nutrition. This comprehensive approach ensures that every healthcare provider – from primary care physicians to specialists such as gynaecologists and cardiologists who interact with pregnant women and parents – has the skills to address vaccine concerns effectively and empathetically.

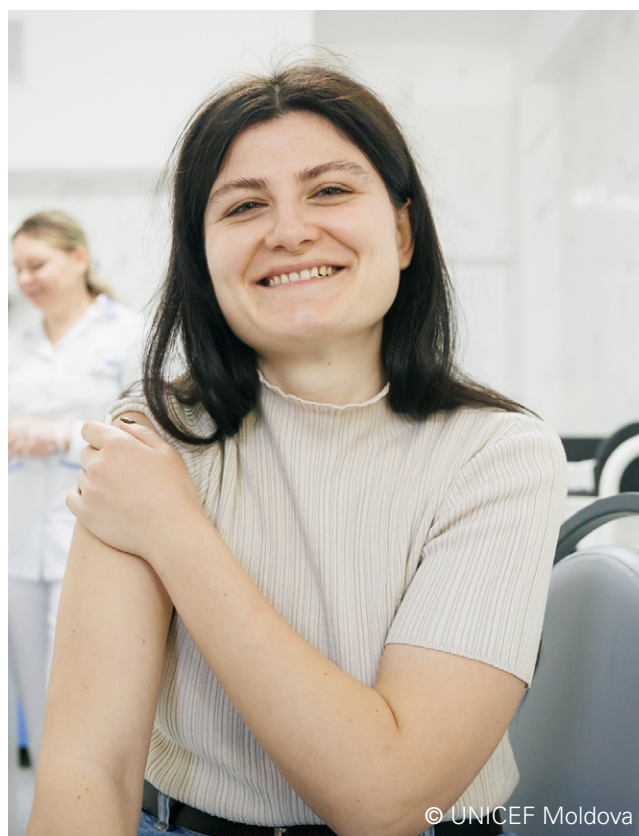
Empowerment and Education of Communities

Various communication and engagement activities are fostering community-wide understanding and collective support for health-

promoting behaviours. For example, five video documentaries on routine childhood vaccines to increase public confidence and demand are being broadcast through national television and in schools, public institutions and healthcare facilities.

UNICEF also trained 180 national evaluators on immunization and nutrition and is currently supporting the review of related content proposed by these evaluators for integration into the national school curriculum. This ensures every child receives accurate and age-appropriate information on health and disease prevention, building a foundation of vaccine literacy for the future.

Furthermore, UNICEF is supporting mechanisms to remove caregivers' barriers to vaccinating their children. For instance, the Ministry of Health agreed to consider removing the vaccination consent form requirement, as evidence indicates that consent forms contribute to vaccine refusals or delays.



Social Listening

UNICEF introduced social media listening in Moldova in 2023 to address COVID-19 and routine immunization concerns. The approach proved so effective in tracking and responding to misinformation that it was fully integrated into the country's public health programme and featured prominently in the 2027 SBC for Immunization Plan. Social listening is currently maintained and coordinated by the NAPH, where staff received training on how to prepare data-driven reports with the social data and how to integrate these insights into targeted public health campaigns to counter misinformation quickly with facts.



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For example, in February 2024, the [Misinformation Management Team](#), which includes health authorities from the Ministry and NAPH, academia and media organizations, became aware of vaccine-related rumours circulating in two local news portals that quickly spread on social media, claiming that an infant had died suddenly a few days after vaccination. The team promptly activated the [Standard Operating Procedure for Misinformation Management](#), including working with health authorities and trusted medical experts to verify the facts, clarify the timeline of events and alert the Press Council, a self-regulatory

media body overseeing ethical standards in the media. By proactively engaging with the media and ensuring that accurate, timely information reached the public, the team not only contained the spread of misinformation but also reaffirmed public trust in vaccine safety.

“We’ve learned that listening is just as important as speaking. When we respond to the actual concerns people have, it builds trust, which is crucial if we want to reverse declining vaccination rates.”

– Veaceslav Gutu, epidemiologist and deputy director of NAPH

Key Results

Moldova's comprehensive, evidence-based approach has yielded both immediate results and sustainable systems-level changes that will benefit children for years to come.

Sustainable Systems and Institutional Capacity

For the first time in Moldova, the 2027 SBC for Immunization Plan outlines a comprehensive and costed roadmap, informed by evidence and best practices from behavioural science, to strengthen the country's national immunization programme and improve immunization coverage equitably and effectively. The plan brings cross-sectoral actors to implement the innovative multidisciplinary behavioural science approaches described in this case study, enabling the country to sustainably address complex health challenges.

Interpersonal communication training is now fully institutionalized across undergraduate, residency and continuing education levels. A functional social listening system with trained national staff provides real-time monitoring and rapid response to misinformation. Furthermore, a [digital course](#)

on social listening at the School of Public Health Management is training a new generation of public health professionals to interpret online data and tackle misinformation.

Measurable Improvements in Vaccination Coverage

The country's comprehensive efforts are starting to show promising results. For example:

- HPV vaccine coverage has increased substantially, reaching 60 per cent in 2023 among 10-year-old girls, up by about 14 percentage points from the previous year.
- DTP1 coverage has remained constant at 87 per cent between 2023 and 2024.
- Coverage with the first dose of meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV1) decreased by only one percentage point, from 85 per cent in 2023 to 84 per cent in 2024, and MCV2 coverage remained constant at 93 per cent.

Lessons Learnt

Moldova's experience demonstrates the return on investment that evidence-based, systems-focused approaches can deliver for immunization programmes.

Investing in continuous collection and use of behavioural insights data is crucial for designing responsive programmes. The investment does not have to be large; small, regular studies (e.g., annually) could be just as informative and potentially even more useful than larger but less frequent studies. To ensure sustainability, capacity to conduct, analyse and use the data should be strengthened among national public health institutions, as was done in Moldova.

Strengthening the skills of all actors involved in vaccine decision-making is essential to promote immunization effectively.

Moldova has sustained and expanded capacity strengthening programmes for healthcare

providers by integrating tailored and tested training into pre-service and in-service curriculum. Critically, this training reaches not only primary care providers but also specialists such as gynaecologists and cardiologists who interact with pregnant women and parents at critical moments, making their role in promoting immunization particularly important.

Social listening provides real-time data to respond to people's vaccination concerns and encourage informed decisions. One lasting impact of Moldova's social listening initiative is the digital course on social listening at the School of Public Health Management. By institutionalizing this course, Moldova has ensured that its national capacity to combat misinformation will continue to grow even as the information environment becomes more complex.

Comprehensive, multidisciplinary approaches deliver synergistic impact. Moldova's success stems from the integration of multiple interventions – behavioural insights research, capacity strengthening, interpersonal communication training, community education and social listening – each reinforcing the others. Investments in service delivery and performance monitoring are also crucial. This systems-level thinking creates impact greater than the sum of individual interventions when adequately budgeted and funded.

References

1. WHO/UNICEF Estimates of National Immunization Coverage, 2024 Revision (completed 15 July 2025), <https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/wuenic-trends/>, accessed 13 March 2026.



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March 2026

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