

Project “Initiative for health and vaccination” in Bulgaria

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Background

In 2009-2010, Bulgaria experienced a measles epidemic, which affected over 24,000 people, predominantly children, with the death toll of 24. 92% of those affected were Roma. Main causes of spread of the epidemic:

- a) Limited access to health services for remoteness, difficulties in communication between healthcare workers and patients, cultural specifics, prejudices towards vaccination;
- b) Some children were not registered with a GP/paediatrician (lack of information, travelling etc.);
- c) Some GPs/paediatricians reported having administered vaccinations that were not administered in reality.

A map of Bulgaria



Project objectives

- ❖ To improve the communication between vulnerable ethnic groups and the healthcare system through common and coordinated activities of Health Mediators, General Practitioners and Regional Health Inspectorates.
- ❖ To increase the knowledge and skills of the Health mediators with regard to vaccination and to raise the awareness of the society for the benefits and safety of the vaccines.

Target groups:

1. Vulnerable people from ethnic minority groups
2. General practitioners working with these groups
3. Institutions on central and local level
4. Society

Timeline:

- ❖ March 2010 - project started - new partners have joined it since then;
- ❖ 2012 - expansion of activities - National Network of Health Mediators joined a 3-year (2012-2014) international project aiming to strengthen the position of the Health Mediators in four European countries - Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia;

Project partners:

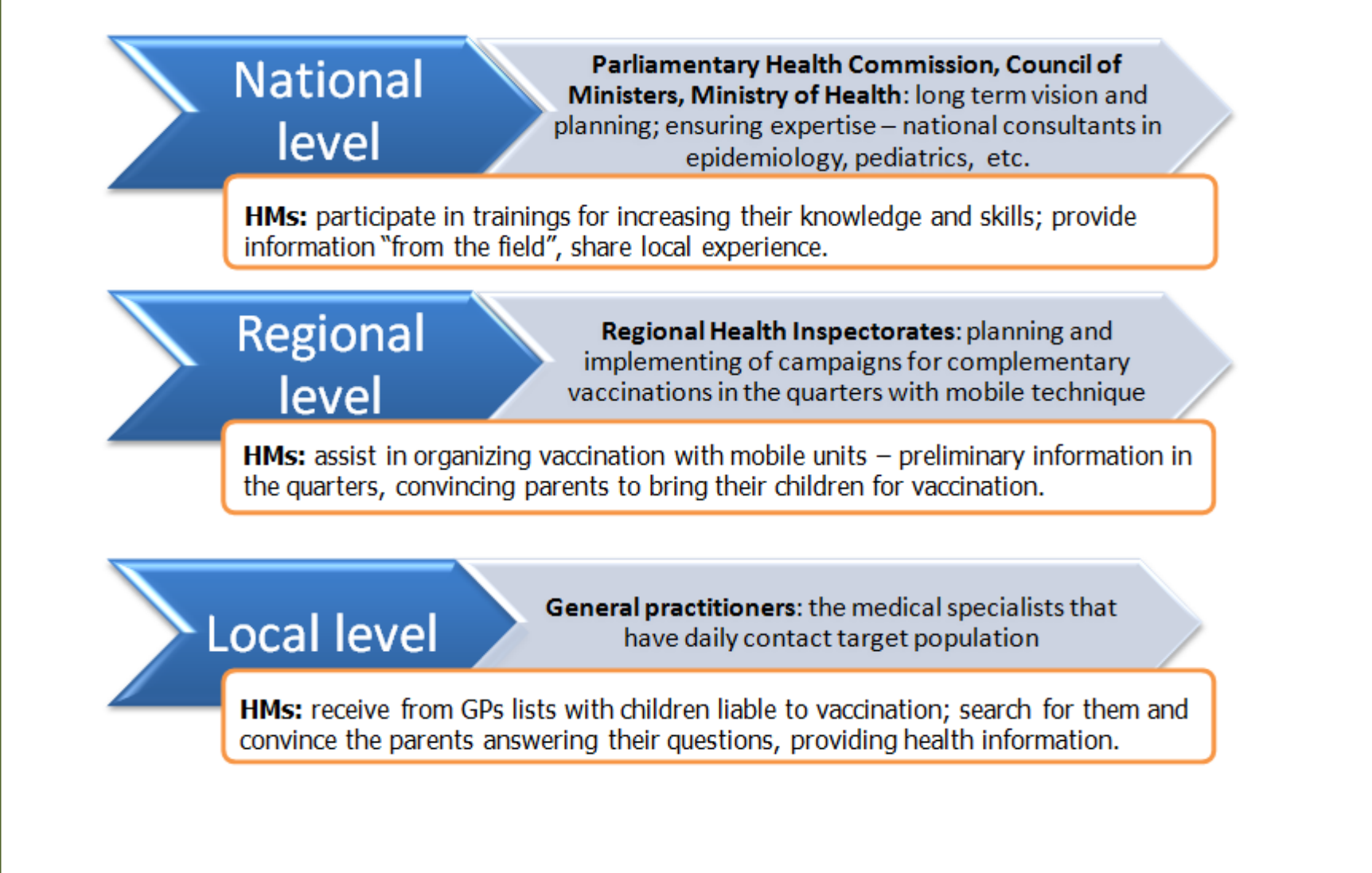
Parliamentary Health Commission, National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues at the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Health of Bulgaria, Regional Health Inspectorates (regional structures of MoH – total of 28), GPs, Association National Network of the Health Mediators (134 Health Mediators working throughout the country)

Key activities

- ❖ 5 national meetings of Health Mediators, GPs and representatives of Regional Health Inspectorates to share their experience in overcoming the measles epidemic (2010);
- ❖ organizing complementary vaccination campaign against poliomyelitis (2011) in Roma community that prevented the dissemination of the disease in Bulgaria;
- ❖ Multiplication of Bulgarian experience in Serbia and Macedonia;
- ❖ Vaccine Academy -twice-a-year event targeting Health Mediators in various regions - leading medical experts train Health Mediators on a variety of topics (highlighting the importance of the timely vaccination, expanding the scope of vaccinations and work with under-vaccinated vulnerable groups; additional focus on TB, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, viral hepatitis and cervical cancer and availability of vaccines).
- ❖ April 2012, Medical University Sofia - 40 new Health Mediators were trained and received professional certificates;
- ❖ Media coverage of vaccination campaigns in national and local media - television, radio, newspapers;

Results and conclusions

- ❖ For the first time in Bulgaria, efforts of the state, the private and NGO sector joined in a common cause;
- ❖ More than 188,000 children were vaccinated (8 mobile units);
- ❖ Upon overcoming of the measles epidemics, the campaign focused on poliomyelitis vaccination;
- ❖ Legislative changes were initiated by the Council of Ministers for the suspension of social benefits for children and the decrease of monthly social assistance benefits to 60% for families who have not vaccinated their children;
- ❖ Strengthening the role of Health Mediators in the context of the National Strategy for Roma Integration (2012-2020);
- ❖ The project gained sustainability and was acknowledged at the highest political level → Health Mediators have the opportunity to continue their educational activities and assistance services to the community;



Recommendations

- ❖ To broaden partnership to all interested parties – national and local institutions, specialists, Health Mediators;
- ❖ To expand Health Mediator’s network to cover the whole country (130 Health Mediators in 2013);
- ❖ To improve Health Mediators’ work conditions, including salaries (currently below the minimum wage for Bulgaria);
- ❖ To continue with organising common events, with the participation of RHI representatives, GPs, health specialists and Health Mediators;
- ❖ To support continuing education of Health Mediators (Vaccine Academy, ROMED trainings, supporting higher education);
- ❖ To continue to support candidate-students of Roma origin, who want to study medicine at Medical universities and colleges in Bulgaria – ensure the existence of preparatory courses and scholarships – state policy included in Roma Integration Strategy Action Plan (2012-2020);



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