

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
STATEMENT
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Save the Children Philippines' statement on soaring measles outbreak

Save the Children Philippines appeals to parents, caregivers, and guardians to have their children immunized particularly the measles vaccine to ensure children's survival and healthy growth. The decline in immunization rate in the country puts Filipino children at risk of dying from preventable diseases. Unvaccinated young children are at highest risk of measles, an airborne disease that infects the respiratory tract, with complications i.e. severe dehydration due to diarrhea, pneumonia, blindness which could lead to acute malnutrition or worse death.

Last February 7, the Department of Health (DOH) declared a measles outbreak in Metro Manila, Region 3 (Central Luzon), Region 4A (CALABARZON), Region 6 (Western Visayas) and Region 7 (Central Visayas). Isolated outbreaks were already reported during the last quarter of 2018 in Mindanao.

Cases of measles nationwide rose to 550 per cent above the normal average from 2017 to 2018. Last year, the DOH reported 21, 812 cases of measles, with 202 deaths, mostly children.

The steady decline in the immunization rate against measles, way below the 95 per cent level is the root cause of the current outbreak according to public health experts.

In 2018, the immunization rate fell to 60 per cent from 75 per cent in 2016, putting over 2.4 million children under five years old at risk of measles.

Between January and February this year, there have been 1,187 suspected measles cases in Metro Manila with 55 deaths. Most of the confirmed deaths are children aged three months to four years old from Manila, Caloocan, Marikina, Pasig, Navotas, Parañaque, Taguig, Pasay, and Malabon. As of 5 February 2019, at least 248 children and 21 adults were being treated for measles in the hospital.

The present measles outbreak is a wake-up call to strengthen the immunization program and employ more responsive, accountable and efficient strategies that would positively change public behavior towards healthcare services. Key State and non-State actors need to identify, analyze and address the underlying social and economic determinants of health to address gaps in service delivery systems and health-seeking behaviors of people so as to strengthen the immunization program.

The public and the private sectors are now coordinating to ensure that the immunization rate against measles will expeditiously improve. In this challenging period, the following steps are highly recommended:

- increase public awareness on the efficiency of the immunization program using various channels, methods and contextualized key messages about immunization;
- ensure that quality health and nutrition programs and services are accessible to children especially those who are vulnerable and marginalized; and
- address the reasons why communities and families still do not comply with and complete their children's immunization requirement.

The National Immunization Program of the DOH needs everyone's support now more than ever. Simply ignoring the gravity and extent of the current measles outbreak is not in the best interest of Filipino children, and does not reflect how we value the life of every child.

In line with the First 1,000 Days Law, which was pushed for by Save the Children Philippines and enacted in November last year, Save the Children Philippines is now developing a First 1,000 Days scorecard for LGUs to monitor the immunization rate for children in barangays. The scorecard will hold the LGUs accountable to provide acceptable coverage of all prescribed immunization as part of their child rights mandate.

