UCLouvain research
Covid-19 vs measles: 120 million children at risk

IN BRIEF:

- According to UCLouvain research conducted in collaboration with WHO, Stanford University, and Harvard Medical School, measles vaccination is taking a back seat to the fight against Covid-19
- 120 million children are at risk of not being vaccinated this year in poor countries, where Covid-19 claims far fewer victims than measles
- The study was published in the prestigious scientific journal Science

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This year nearly 120 million children in 37 countries are at risk of not getting the measles vaccine, according to a study conducted by the UCLouvain Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) in collaboration with Stanford University, Harvard Medical School, and the World Health Organization.

The lack of vaccination is caused by prioritising the fight against Covid-19. Measles was already spreading in recent years, mainly because of the ‘anti-vaccine’ movement. The current pandemic increases the risks by relegating measles as a secondary concern in some countries.

According to UCLouvain scientists, a mere 15% reduction in routine measles vaccinations could result in the deaths of nearly a quarter of a million children in poor countries.

The situation is particularly grave in conflict zones, owing to the malnutrition of children and their mothers, which worsens mortality in the event of measles. In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, in the conflict-affected Ituri and North Kivu provinces, the fight against Covid-19 could delay the vaccination of nearly a million children. Yet, in most poor countries, mortality from Covid-19 has remained low compared to the risks posed by measles. Just one example: again in the eastern DRC, 37 people died from Covid-19 in June, while 6,000 died from measles in just a few months, most of them children.

Scientists at UCLouvain, Harvard, Stanford, and WHO are calling for policies aimed at fighting Covid-19 to take into account other threats posed by high-transmission diseases in poor countries, particularly in areas of conflict. If children are not vaccinated at the right time, they will lose the benefits of lifelong immunity.

This research was carried out by UCLouvain CRED Director Debarati Guha-Sapir and CRED Fellow Maria Moitinho De Almeida, the WHO’s Mory Keita, Harvard Medical School’s Gregg Greenough, and Stanford University’s Eran Bendavid.