



Success story

Rural social entrepreneur boosts immunization coverage



Community Coalition provide mothers and children transport from hard to reach riverine communities to immunization points

Photo: John Dada, COMPASS

Tucked securely in a canoe, mothers and children chorused traditional songs as they traveled to the nearest routine immunization post some 8 kilometers away from Ajara, a remote rural community in Badagry local government area in Lagos state. It was another immunization day and as usual, the capable hands of sixty-five-year-old J.J. Koklanu paddled them around the floating logs that obstructed the river.

Though several other expert paddlers live in the area, only Koklanu provides free transport to the immunization post so that the cost of travel does not prevent children from receiving life saving vaccines. With megaphone in hand, he attracts children and their mothers to points of departure by stressing the importance of immunization and offering free rides to the post. According to a resident in the area, Alaba Lunyinsode, "There are high levels of childhood illnesses and parents mostly resorted to traditional medicines because of the distance to the health facility. Sometimes, the medicines caused more harm and led to the death of several children." Frequent malaria and water borne diseases are prevalent in the mainly farming and fishing population.

Throughout Nigeria, high rates of illness and death in children under the age of five are mainly caused by treatable and preventable diseases such as malaria, measles, diarrhea and respiratory infections. At the same time, more than half of Nigerian children are malnourished due to low rates of exclusive breastfeeding, poor quality food and simply not having enough to eat. This is besides parents' lack of basic knowledge and management of childhood illness. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 22% of child deaths in Nigeria - over 200,000 deaths per year - could be prevented with vaccines.

Guided by the USAID funded Community Participation for Action in the Social Sector (COMPASS) project, Koklanu and other community members in Ajara are spearheading grassroot initiatives to improve health and education outcomes. As chairperson of the community coalition in the area, Koklanu leads by doing. Since 2005, he has single-handedly improved access to immunization services and increased vaccination coverage by ferrying children and their mothers to the closest immunization point.

Grateful mothers express their delight and appreciation for his support over the years. "They now look forward to the trips," said community member, Chief Michael Zannu. "The kids like the sound of his megaphone, they like his approach,"

he concluded. Thanks to Koklanu, 2,477 children in Ajara have been immunized.

In several communities where USAID works, social entrepreneurs like Koklanu are stepping up to the task, contributing their skills and resources to improve the quality of life. The community in Ajara has also contributed money to operate a local dispensary which maintains a revolving drug supply. USAID supported the effort by training community health promoters on how to provide basic health services. As a result of USAID and the community's efforts, malaria cases reduced by 87.4%, from 253 in January to 32 in September 2007, according dispensary records.