



SUCCESS STORY

Families Flock to Child Health Week

Popular event offers high-impact health services and vaccines



Photo: HSSP/Melissa Thompson

During Child Health Week in Zambia, community health volunteer Mary Kafumbe weighs Joshua Matabula under the watchful eye of his mother, Prisca.

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Reducing high rates of preventable illness and death among young children is an ongoing challenge for Zambia, where more than 70 percent of the population is poor. An innovative approach to reach Zambian children is Child Health Week, a mass campaign held twice a year in clinics and communities nationwide. With the support of partners like USAID, the highly publicized event supplements the health sector’s day-to-day work with a free package of high-impact services to prevent common diseases and malnutrition in children under age 5.

During a recent Child Health Week, Prisca Matabula, the 29-year-old wife of a taxi driver, was one of hundreds of women who lined up with their young children outside a one-room building at Ng’ombe Health Center in Lusaka. Nurses and community health volunteers weighed babies, provided health information and administered vaccinations, recording each step on tally sheets and green client cards. Five-month-old Joshua Matabula sat quietly in the baby scale, but screamed when he got a multi-vaccine shot in his chubby thigh. His brother, Noah, 3, bravely swallowed immunity-boosting vitamin A and a de-worming pill. As they left, a clinic worker handed each family a chunk of dark blue hand soap, reinforcing the message of hand washing to protect health.

A USAID program works with the Ministry of Health at all levels to increase access to quality health services and strengthen the overall delivery system through strategies like Child Health Week. The program uses a systems approach, providing training and other support to improve planning, performance, supervision, data management and health worker retention. “There is this continuous help,” said Lewis Mwila, a provincial Ministry of Health official in Lusaka. “The length of time to get things done would be much longer without USAID.”

The partnership is paying off. Eighty-two percent of Zambian children are now fully immunized by age one. The percentage of children receiving vitamin A supplements increased from 67 to 86 percent in two years. Nearly two million children were de-wormed last year. Overall, mortality for children under age 5 fell 30 percent from 2002 to 2007.