



## 'Gyaran hanci ya fi gyaran gona': Dispelling myths about immunization in Zamfara

Farming is the pride of the people of Lema Babba Ward in Gummi Local Government Area (LGA), Zamfara State.

Lema Babba sits on some of the most fertile land in Nigeria, supplying grains and other food stuffs to feed the hungry, growing nation.

But farming requires a healthy population and Gummi is currently afflicted by high maternal and child mortality as well as morbidity. These are caused by diseases such as polio and measles, which can lead to deafness, blindness and other serious but preventable medical complications.

Although these diseases and their effects can be prevented by immunization, until recently many people in Gummi – as in other parts of Zamfara state – held incorrect beliefs about immunization and this affected uptake of services.

"We were told that the government people grew tired of our existence, that they saw us as poor and an unnecessary burden and therefore planned on reducing our population through immunization. Our jittery husbands took the speculation seriously, which I think explains why, in the past, they were hell bent on not allowing us to take our children for immunization," explains Malama Aisha Sani, a mother of six who showed up at Lema Dispensary.

Many strategies, including radio campaigns and the government's declared National Immunization Days – a nationwide initiative aimed at reaching every nook and cranny of the country – have tried to improve the health and wellbeing of women and children, but none has achieved a lasting impact so far.

### Actions speak louder than words

However, it appears that a recent community engagement approach introduced by a 'health partnership' of community members, government and external development partners may make this kind of impact. The approach is aimed at increasing uptake of antenatal and routine immunization services, with initial efforts aimed at increasing vaccinations.

A very popular Hausa proverb, as old as farming itself, goes: *daga na gaba ka ga zurfin rijiya*, which translates directly as: *by observing a successfully swimming, or pitifully drowning, person, one can size up a river*. An equivalent proverb in English would be: *actions speak louder than words*.

In Lema Babba, it was the Gummi Chairman who heard the message of the new engagement approach and acted – his newborn was the first to be immunized at a well-attended flagship event for routine immunization in the area. He was supported by other local leaders in Lema Babba and immediately people in Lema, Gelenge and other towns in Gummi took heed.

According to Malam Ibrahim Sabon Gari, the ward head of Lema Babba, "In the past there wasn't a dispensary in Lema, and when Lema Dispensary came into being it was like a ghost house, deserted, with few parents mustering the courage to take their newborn for routine immunization. But, *Alhamdulillah* [praise-be-to God], today I am receiving complaints about



## Partnership for Reviving Routine Immunization in Northern Nigeria; Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Initiative

shortages of tools and equipment, especially syringes and seating, to carry out routine immunizations due to the upsurge in attendance. You can see for yourself the women standing in a long queue waiting for their turn. It is a welcome development."

The new community engagement approach, which stresses self-help, has managed among other things to:

- Identify and recruit local community volunteers (traditional leaders are particularly sought after because of their social standing and influence).
- Engage the community volunteers and other stakeholders in community forums to educate them about the importance of vaccinations and motivate them to assist health workers with tasks such as identifying and tracking newborn babies, and maintaining the health facility during routine immunization sessions.
- Train community members in the use of 'hand and body tools' such as the Vaccination Hand. This tool uses the fingers of the hand to remind people when to take mother and baby to the health facility for vaccination.
- Institute a system for registering and tracking newborns to ensure they have their 'four visits by four months', so that they are on the road to being a fully immunized child before the first birthday.
- Provide assistance to families to take their newborns to the health facility for vaccinations.

The approach has been introduced to the people of Lema by the Zamfara State Technical Assistance Team of PRRINN-MNCH – the PRRINN-MNCH stands for the Partnership for Reviving Routine Immunization in Northern Nigeria and the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Initiative. PRRINN-MNCH has worked closely with the state and LGA health educators and other staff to develop and implement the community engagement strategy for routine immunization.

On the spot assessment of a session that took place in September 2009 at Lema Dispensary indicates success: "Today, people from as far as Gelenge Ward, a kilometre away from Lema Babba, are trekking down to Lema for routine immunization", said Malama Aisha Sani.

The seeds of an attitudinal change have already been planted in the minds of the people of Lema and by extension the people of Gummi. Change has come home to stay! As the Hausa say, *gyaran hanci ya fi gyaran gona*, meaning *taking good care of your health is better than taking care of your farm*.

However, at least one area for further improvement remains: addressing the current absence of a female health care attendant. Malama Aisha Sani explains that, "Most women attending the facilities can better identify with a female attendant than a male attendant". She is therefore advocating for the authorities concerned to intervene in this regard.

*By Salisu Koki*