

IMPACT BRIEF:

Better maternal and child health through enhanced community engagement

Introduction

Half of the world's deaths during pregnancy, childbirth, and in the first five years of life occur in sub-Saharan African countries. Since 2014, the Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa (IMCHA) initiative has made important strides towards improving the lives of women and children in 11 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Co-funded by Global Affairs Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and Canada's International Development Research Centre, IMCHA is an eight-year, \$36 million initiative. IMCHA has supported 28 projects through 19 research teams, as well as two Health Policy and Research Organizations (HPROs). Some projects explored interventions with the community for women to access and use health services. Ultimately, the result is better health for women and children.

Overview of the challenges

Pregnant women from less advantaged communities are more likely to

- lack information about the risk factors and warning signs during pregnancy;
- have limited access to prenatal care;
- deliver their children outside of healthcare facilities, without skilled attendants;
- lack family planning information and access to contraception; and
- experience disrespectful behaviour from healthcare providers.



SYLVAIN CHERKAOUI, IDRC



The benefits of community engagement

To create demand for better access and quality health care, and ensure sustainable change, it's important to involve women; men; families; youth; community, religious, traditional, and opinion leaders; healthcare providers; government representatives; and civil society groups. Together, they can help identify problems, set priorities, and implement locally relevant solutions.

"The community is now aware about the importance of a pregnant woman giving birth at the health facility. When a mother feels labour pains, she knows she can't wait for anyone there at home. She will be escorted by her fellow or the [community health worker] here to the facility."

Health worker, Tanzania

SUCCESS STORIES

Working with women and men champions in Tanzania

In two districts of the Iringa region of Tanzania, a research team trained groups of women to educate others about maternal and child health within their communities. Overcoming barriers posed by gender norms, by the end of the project, the women felt empowered to express their concerns in village meetings and to go to other villages to share the knowledge. The project also organized men champions to deliver important health messages and raise awareness among other men in the community about the value of taking care of women's and children's health.

IMPACT

94% increase in women receiving postnatal care within 48 hours in the Mufindi district

70% increase in women starting prenatal care within their first trimester in the Kilolo district

62% and **48%** increase in the use of modern contraceptives in the Kilolo and Mufindi districts, respectively

Improving access to information and care in Mozambique

Elevating maternal and child health to be a priority for the entire community, in Nampula province in rural Mozambique, a research team tested a plan with seven strategies to fill unique knowledge and service gaps to decrease newborn and maternal deaths. For example, they supported local community health committees in promoting health education, and traditional teachers in delivering sexual and reproductive health messages during coming-of-age ceremonies.

The project also introduced a novel community-managed transportation system with motorcycle ambulances to help pregnant women and emergency patients get to the hospital faster.

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185% increase in the number of women who made four prenatal visits

89% increase in deliveries at the hospital thanks to the motorcycle ambulance system

89% increase in regular health visits for children under the age of 1

Changing norms at a national scale in Senegal

In Senegal, a research team demonstrated how building on the leadership of *Bajenu Gox* (neighbourhood godmothers), a country-wide network of women leaders in the community, helped make it more acceptable for women and teenage girls to make decisions around maternal and child health and family planning. The *Bajenu Gox* also contributed to the process of changing gender norms around gender-based violence, early and forced marriages and pregnancies, and female genital mutilation.

IMPACT

10,000 home visits

➔ means that more women are using health services

➔ which contributed to **79** fewer maternal deaths per 100,000 live births between 2015 and 2017

LESSONS LEARNED

Actively engage women and men from the community

Communities that are more involved in the research are more likely to share information, take ownership of successful solutions, and push for lasting change in women's and children's health. Identifying women and men champions and supporting women's leadership can help to influence their peers.

Community health workers are a trusted source of information

As community members, community health workers understand the traditions, context, and protocols, making them effective health educators and advocates for using health services.

Collaborate with community leaders to build ownership and fast-track change

Working with community leaders helps build buy-in. When motivated and supported, they can contribute to promoting changes in norms and practices to make a lasting transformation in the way women's and children's health issues are perceived and handled. This leads to short-term gains and long-term positive impact.

ANDREW ESIEBO, IDRC



"Community mobilization has ensured that the major groups within the community are involved – traditional heads, road transport workers, market women, associations."

Ojuolape Solanke, West African Health Organization focal point in Nigeria

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