

IMPACT BRIEF: Enhancing community health workers' motivation and impact for better maternal and child health

Introduction

In the past decades, remarkable progress has been made in reducing child mortality. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is lagging, however. In 2019, one child out of 13 in SSA died before his or her fifth birthday. Girls and women here also suffer from the world's highest maternal mortality ratio – 533 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. A shortage of skilled health personnel aggravates these problems. To breach this gap, many African countries rely on community health workers (CHWs). Selected, trained, and based in the communities from which they come, CHWs are on the front line of health care, providing a vital link between health facilities and communities.

CHWs have made substantial contributions to universal health coverage by ensuring access to care for the hardest-to-reach. They are also vital to building strong health systems that contribute to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SGD 3 - Good health and well-being.

Since 2014, the Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa (IMCHA) initiative has made important strides toward improving the lives of women and children in 11 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including by better understanding CHWs' role and motivation, enhancing their skills, and working to fully integrate them in health systems. 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.



SYLVAIN CHERKAOUI, IDRC

Overview of the challenges

- About 70% of CHWs worldwide are women, and many are volunteers. Their motivation comes from the good they do and the community's respect for their position. However, given their responsibilities to care for themselves and their families on top of their role as CHWs, it is often difficult for them to continue their work without some form of incentive.
- Many CHWs cover large geographical areas and they must travel long distances, often on foot or using precarious means of transportation, to visit their assigned households.
- Because of low levels of education, poor training materials, or irregular refresher trainings, CHWs are often not well-enough equipped to reach their potential.

“There has been a very rapid diffusion of these ideas in other districts within Jimma Zone. The IEC – or Information, Education and Communication – strategy has already been adopted by multiple other districts within Jimma Zone, and is being considered or revised and adopted at the national level.”

*Ronald Labonté, co-Principal Investigator
IMCHA Ethiopia project*



The benefits of strengthening CHWs

- Strengthening CHW's roles and capacity expands the reach of health information and services especially in underserved communities.
- Strong CHWs' performance leads to increased trust of the population in health services, better access to services, and reduced inequalities. This contributes to improved maternal and child health outcomes.

SUCCESS STORIES

Implementing a comprehensive package of maternal and child health interventions in Tanzania

A research team in Tanzania developed, implemented, and evaluated a comprehensive package of interventions, including the establishment of district-led networks of CHWs to improve maternal, neonatal and child health. Among other activities, CHWs conducted educational home visits and assessed and referred pregnant women and newborns to health facilities. CHWs also promoted savings/loans groups or income-generating activities for their and the community's benefit, boosting motivation and fostering sustainability. To ease CHWs' burden and further motivate them, more than half of communities exempted them from obligatory community work and other civic duties.

IMPACT

96% of a network of over 1,600 CHWs established in 2017 were still working in 2019

90% increase in the number of women attending four or more antenatal visits between 2017 and 2018

Increase in male engagement in maternal health from 30% in 2017 to 65% in 2020, leading to more antenatal visits

Training CHWs to mobilize families

To improve maternal health, a research team in Ethiopia trained 137 health extension workers (HEW) in information, education and communication strategies. Their activities on safe motherhood priorities and practices reached more than 10,000 women members of the Health Development Armies – community health workers who assist the HEWs – and 118 religious leaders. This contributed to building trusting relationships with communities and mobilizing support for women in overcoming challenges in accessing services.

IMPACT

More than 50% of women surveyed in 2019 reported that HEWs and nurses were their main sources of maternal and child health information

30% more likelihood for women living in intervention areas to deliver their baby in a health facility compared to women living in control areas between 2016 and 2019.

"To me I see CHWs have contributed to those successes ... because they have been able to identify challenges in the villages. They are the ones who see those challenges during their home visits. They educate the community and they understand and take action so that families reach and attend health facilities."

CHW Tanzania

LESSONS LEARNED

CHWs are a trusted source of information and effective intermediaries between communities and healthcare providers

To ensure CHWs' motivation and sustainability, various types of incentives, other than a salary, such as enabling them to undertake income-generating activities, can be implemented.

CHWs need to be fully integrated in the health system and their status should be formalized and reflected in national policy frameworks.

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