

The use of Community Health Workers in Strengthening Public Health Interventions in Africa: GHSS' Experience

INTRODUCTION

Global Health Systems Solutions (GHSS) is a Cameroon-based international non-governmental organization created in 2007. It has as a vision to strengthen health systems, services and networks in developing countries, and conduct operational research to support healthcare programmes. In her strive to strengthen public health interventions across Africa, GHSS has, over the years, used Community Health Workers (CHWs) across several disciplines. This write up is designed to share GHSS' experience in using CHWs in strengthening public health interventions across different projects that she has implemented.

PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS USING COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Implementation of COVID-19 Intervention in Chad and The Republic of Burundi Under the Partnership For Accelerated COVID-19 Testing (PACT), November-December 2020

In November 2020, GHSS obtained a subcontract from Africa Field Epidemiology Network (AFENET) to boost the response against COVID-19 in Chad and the Republic of Burundi. Some activities were carried out with some outcomes, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health of each country:

Activities



200 CHWs and **10** supervisors selected across **23** regional health provinces in Chad trained.



400 CHWs and **20** supervisors trained across the Republic of Burundi.



1 field bag, **1** thermo flask, **1** polo shirt, **1** t-shirt, **1** raincoat, **12** bottles of hydro-alcoholic gel and **2** boxes of **50** facemask each given to each CHWs.

Outcomes



1,671,585 persons sensitized on COVID-19 preventions, signs and symptoms in Chad.



891,823 persons detected with COVID-19 symptoms, **805,473** orientated to health facilities for testing and care.



5311+ of COVID-19 positive cases contact-traced, and **1573** cases managed by CHWs.

Risk Communication and Community Engagement for Uptake of COVID-19 Vaccinations in Cameroon, August to December 2021

GHSS received funding, in July 2021, from Africa CDC through AFENET to support the Cameroon's Ministry of Public Health in scaling up COVID-19 vaccination and preventing several vaccines from expiring. Given that 52.3% of the population refused the vaccine as of March 2021, there was a need to boost risk communication and community engagement. The use of CHWs was identified as a key strategy to reduce this COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. The following activities were carried out with some outcomes:

Activities



701+ CHWs recruited, oriented and deployed to all **10** regions of Cameroon to support risk communication and community engagement, and to boost the demand for COVID-19 vaccination.



Backpacks, flag jackets, a COVID-19 manual (sample questions and answers to common questions), pens, pencils, erasers, PPEs (masks, and hand sanitizers), and daily data collection sheets provided to CHWs.

Outcomes



16230+ doses of COVID-19 vaccines administered at fixed CVCs following the identification and linkage of clients from the community.



56150 doses of vaccines were administered by the mobile vaccination teams at the different vaccination hotspots identified by the CHWs.

Scaling up COVID-19 Response by Implementing Integrated Community Initiative to Address COVID-19 Resurgences in Six African Countries, December 2021- November 2022

GHSS received funds from Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND) to scale up COVID-19 response by implementing community surveillance in six countries (Cameroon, The Republic of Congo, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso). The Organization used community health workers, who helped to identify people with ILI symptoms within the community, screened with RDT, and managed accordingly, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health of each country.

Activities



376 CHWs selected, trained and deployed to support COVID-19 community surveillance across the six implementing countries.



Trained CHWs engaged in community sensitization and mobilization, COVID-19 case identification, sample collection, testing, result interpretation, documentation, referrals and contact tracing.

Outcomes



28,041 persons screened for COVID-19.



13,225 persons tested for COVID-19.

253 COVID-19 positive cases identified.

06 countries committed to reinforcing integrated community based surveillance as a strategy to prevent resurgences of COVID-19.

Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Cameroon's Conflict-Affected North West and South West Regions, July to November 2022

GHSS is working closely with the Cameroon Ministry of Public Health in leveraging existing resources like Extension for Community Health Outcomes (ECHO) and CHWs to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. These regions have been experiencing deteriorating humanitarian situation within the last 4 years due to an armed conflict.

Activities



300 CHWs selected, trained and deployed to assist in providing sexual education and basic sexual and reproductive services in 8 health districts in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.



Trained CHWs engaged in providing sexual & reproductive health education, and family planning services, treatment of sexually transmitted infections and in strengthening the community referral systems through identifications and referral of more advanced cases requiring expert guidance.

Outcomes

417,338 persons educated on sexual and reproductive health in 8 health districts.

97011 persons in need of sexual and reproductive health services identified.

87730 provided with basic sexual and reproductive services, **9281** others referred to nearby health facilities for advanced care.

35531 male condoms, **3073** female condoms, **824** emergency contraceptive pills, **532** oral contraceptives, and **11688** injectable contraceptives distributed.

843 teenage pregnancies cases, **129** gender-based violence cases, **756** cases with STIs, and **290** unvaccinated children identified and linked to care.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ✚ The work of CHWs promotes community appropriation and ownership of health care activities, which is important for sustainability.
- ✚ CHWs play an important role in sensitization and raising awareness on the importance of identifying individual responsibility to health within communities.
- ✚ Using polyvalent CHWs strengthens health system resilience, while reinforcing pandemic response and control.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

CHWs play an important role in optimizing health programmes. However, implementation gaps such as continuous remuneration or incentives and supervision are frequently encountered. Thus, there is need for full integration of CHWs in health systems to ensure the sustainability of their interventions.