

Field Notes From Nigeria #2

By Michael Bociurkiw



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Children in Kano state look on as their younger siblings receive vaccination.

29 April 2010, Today was a roller coaster ride of hope and despair.

Hope because we witnessed an entire community - mobilized by its traditional leader - rally around the cause of polio immunization. At a so-called flag-off ceremony at the remote settlement of Yalwa in Rimin Gado LGA - led by the District Head, Alhaji Shehu Mohammed Dankade - children thronged the polio vaccination point even before it opened.

Two local men beat drums and plucked at a string instrument, while another used a bull horn to announce that the polio vaccine had arrived and was ready to be dropped into the mouths of children.

"It's amazing there seems to be absolutely no resistance to polio vaccination," said a health worker. Dankade, religious and political leaders lined up to administer the first double drops to young children. Girls and boys thrust their younger siblings forward to receive the two drops of vaccine. Health workers then drew a line on their fingers with a blue marker, handed them some sweets or a bar of soap and ticked off a box on a tally sheet.

The enthusiasm and almost carnival-like atmosphere left us pumped up, elated. What we saw was the culmination of weeks and months of high-level advocacy - coupled with excruciating micro-planning at the local level - to ensure that all 6-million or so eligible children 0-5 years old in Nigeria are protected against polio.

It was during the ceremony that we were introduced to two young polio victims. Actually no one needed to point them out to us. I spotted them through the viewfinder of my SONY camcorder as I planned to capture the scene for a UNICEF website feature. Their legs hung lifeless on the chairs. Their eyes full of sadness as they sat motionless while their friends rushed to the vaccinators for the drops and sweets. Because their parents had failed to get them vaccinated in the first crucial months of their lives they will be deprived of a normal life forever. That's the grim and cruel reality of the invisible polio virus as it travels indiscriminately from child to child - and across borders.

I commented to my UNICEF colleague, Josephine Kamara, that parents only need to see these victims first hand in order to take the necessary steps to protect their children. Indeed we are told by health workers that there are few, if any, so-called non-compliance cases in Yalwa. Covering the entire targeted group of kids should be, in theory, a no-brainer.

But then we come face-to-face with what I termed one of the few remaining "weak links" in the global, multi-million dollar effort to eradicate polio.

An Expert Review Committee of Nigerians, UNICEF, WHO, Rotary and other partners has recommended a minimum of eight rounds of polio drops - down from 12 doses in previous years.

One WHO field worker said Monday that a freezer generator procured specially for the polio vaccination campaign in Kano state broke within minutes because it hadn't been installed properly. In some areas solar powered refrigerators are used but have life spans of only one or two years because they are not maintained properly.

Later, at a meeting of state partners that was held in the dark due to power outages, we hear that a handful of LGAs have delayed vaccination because they haven't put into place supplies of so-called plusses - soap, sweets and other handouts that have been proven to attract mothers and their kids to vaccination days.

Out here in rural areas, where some communities have only a dozen children, health workers need to travel long distances just to reach a small pocket of kids. And when the rainy season strikes, many villages are inaccessible - even by motorcycle, said the WHO point person in Rogo LGA. "In urban areas reaching 750 children is easily done in one day. Out here some health workers consider a day successful if they have reached 15 children."

He went on to emphatically explain that all it takes is one missed child to infect others. "That one child we missed can be a big problem," he said, adding that he has more than half a million children to track for vaccination in more than 600 communities.

Experts estimate that just one infected child could put another 200 at risk.

On the way back to the state capital, in the UNICEF vehicle, Josephine explains that the technique of handing out soap and sweets to mothers during the polio rounds has helped draw them out of their homes. Indeed I saw for myself how every mother grasped for the handouts as soon as their children received the polio drop.

The 600,000-plus children targeted for vaccination in this LGA is part of the critical second round of a synchronized effort to stop a polio outbreak across west and central Africa. In all, more than 77 million children in 16 countries will be vaccinated.

To end this outbreak, two drops of oral polio vaccine (OPV) will be administered to every child in all 16 countries, including Nigeria. An army of more than 300,000 volunteers and health workers will work up to 12 hours per day, travelling on foot or bicycles, in cars and boats and on motorcycles, in often trying conditions. Each vaccination team will carry the vaccine in special carriers, filled with ice packs to ensure the vaccine remains below the required 8°C.