Integration, community engagement, and polio eradication in Nigeria

Authors’ reply
We thank Seye Abimbola for highlighting some of the implications arising from our analyses of oral poliovirus vaccine (OPV) use in Nigeria. Community engagement and demand generation are vital to the success of the poliomyelitis eradication programme. Our analyses suggest that efficacy of OPV in Nigeria, even in the northern states, is sufficient to interrupt wild poliovirus transmission if high coverage is achieved consistently. Therefore, Nigeria has the means necessary to finish the job; the major setbacks during 2012 were a result of low campaign quality, rather than low vaccine efficacy.

We discussed in our report the potential to improve vaccine acceptance and increase demand for OPV by engaging people within communities to deliver health education. Our analysis focused on all reported sources of health education within a community—ie, not only traditional leaders but also the local media and relatives. Obtaining health information via religious leaders strongly affected the probability that a child had received OPV, but health workers and town announcers also had a substantial effect on the probability of a child being vaccinated against poliovirus. Because targeted social mobilisation is an effective way to increase vaccine acceptance in high-risk communities, this strategy is now the focal point for many new initiatives. Examples include appointing survivors of poliomyelitis to raise awareness and using traditional birth attendants to educate mothers and promote vaccine acceptance.

Abimbola correctly notes that rates of refusal of OPV were low during routine immunisation campaigns, a finding that is to be expected because caregivers who are actively attending health facilities are more likely to accept vaccines. An integrated approach to child health—ie, combining OPV delivery with interventions for other childhood diseases during supplementary immunisation activities—has been initiated in Nigeria with the establishment of health camps. These temporary primary health-care facilities have been launched in areas with continued poor performance of vaccination programmes and are just one of several new initiatives to target children with insufficient immunity. Such innovative strategies, coupled with strengthened community engagement, will be crucial to break poliovirus transmission in Nigeria.

We declare no competing interests.

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