

Harnessing influence: Accelerating COVID-19 vaccination in Zambia through engagement and involvement of local leaders



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Track D57: Social and behavioral aspects and approaches to COVID-19

Problem/Background/Issue

Following global trends, Zambia anticipated a fourth COVID-19 wave in December 2021. As of November 2021, only 12.5% of the eligible population were fully vaccinated, and 4.6% had received their first dose. To get more people vaccinated and help protect against severe forms of COVID-19 and the associated mortality, the Ministry of Health (MOH) launched the campaign; "Get Vaccinated. Fight COVID-19. Protect Zambia: Two Million Doses in Arms By End of December 2021".

The USAID DISCOVER-Health Project, implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), supported the MOH campaign in December by holding a community mobilization strategy meeting with local civic, traditional, and religious leadership. These trusted custodians of Zambian society are able to encourage people to make the safe and smart choice to get vaccinated.

Response

The project supported the campaign in all 22 districts of the Copperbelt and Central Provinces and involved:

- Creating an environment for COVID-19 vaccination mobilization and uptake by engaging the media, civic, religious, traditional, and other leaders to support the vaccine and the campaign, and to demonstrate this support to the public.
- Conducting breakfast meetings where local media and leaders learned more about the COVID-19 epidemic in their area, the vaccination targets, and planned activities for the campaign. This provided them with knowledge and skills to create demand for the COVID-19 vaccine and increase its uptake at community level, including by getting vaccinated themselves.

- Equipping the media with accurate information on COVID-19 vaccines for them to encourage Zambians to get vaccinated, and to provide significant air time to leaders to promote vaccination through interviews and meetings on radio, TV, and social media platforms.
- Expanding outreach service delivery to people in their communities which included; door-to-door, schools, workplaces, markets, bus stations, places of worship and other congregate settings, as well as routine health facility-based service delivery.
- Providing user-informed targeted risk communication, especially interpersonal, delivered by fully oriented community mobilizers and leaders.



Above: A leaders' sensitization meeting in Senior Chief Mboloma's village, Central Province



Above: Senior Chief Mboloma being vaccinated

Achievements

With the project's support, the country met the December 2 million doses target: in Copperbelt and Central Provinces, 216,480 doses—31% of the national December Drive goal of 701,000 people—were administered. Copperbelt, with 160,510 people vaccinated, was the best performing province in the country.

Lessons Learned

Harnessing the influence of respected civic, traditional, religious, and other leaders and equipping them with accurate information to support COVID-19 vaccination, as well as expanding access to vaccines through outreach services, enabled more people in Copperbelt and Central Provinces to get vaccinated ahead of the fourth COVID-19 wave. USAID DISCOVER-Health will replicate this community mobilization strategy in all the provinces that the project supports.