Community Health Transformation: Rural Women Volunteers Leading Post-Covid-19 Healthcare Recovery in Nigeria.

Health care in rural communities of Edo and Delta states of Nigeria faces significant challenges, one of the most pressing being the acute shortage of skilled healthcare providers and limited access to quality healthcare services. The availability of healthcare facilities alone does not guarantee access, as many residents lack awareness of the services available at the primary health centre. Traditional practices, such as home deliveries and the underutilisation of antenatal care and post-natal services, persist, putting the lives of mothers and newborns at risk. Furthermore, inadequate health education contributes to poor child immunisation rates and delays in seeking medical care for preventable illnesses. These issues are worsened by socio-economic constraints and cultural beliefs that often prioritise home-based or traditional care over professional medical services. In light of these challenges, the need for community-based intervention became critical. The project team trained Primary Health Care (PHC) heads/staff who in turn trained Volunteer Health Workers (VHW) to play an essential role in improving health outcomes in these communities by serving as the vital link between healthcare service providers and users, ensuring that community members, especially women and children, receive the care and health education they need. In resource-constrained environments, where maternal and child mortality rates are high, VHWs proved to be instrumental in reducing deaths and improving healthcare outcomes across sub-Saharan Africa.

Key Activities of Volunteer Health Workers in Project Communities

The VHWs engaged in a variety of activities aimed at improving healthcare delivery and outcomes, particularly for women and children. Their responsibilities involve conducting community outreach, where they visit homes to provide health education and raise awareness about the importance of maternal and child health services. In this role, they serve as liaisons between the community and health facilities, encouraging families to make use of available healthcare services.

In addition to outreach, the VHWs focus on health education and advocacy, promoting key household practices such as breastfeeding, proper hygiene, and nutrition. By educating families, they help to reduce preventable diseases and improve overall health outcomes. Their training also equips them to provide effective first aid and emergency response for minor injuries like small cuts and wounds, as well as more urgent cases such as fevers, convulsions, and diarrhoea. When necessary, they offer immediate care and ensure critical cases are referred to healthcare facilities.

Furthermore, the VHWs' also help in supporting maternal and new-born health by identifying warning signs during pregnancy and postpartum periods that require urgent medical attention. They monitor mothers and new-borns for danger signs, such as severe bleeding, infections, or

ensuring timely referrals to healthcare services.

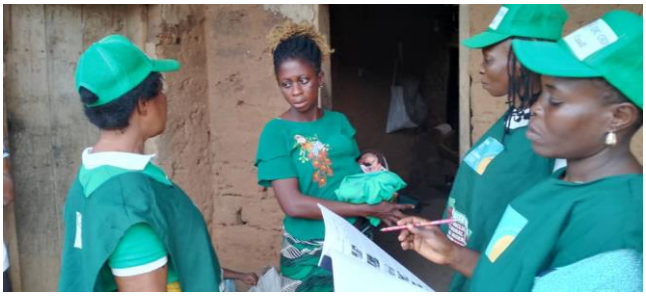


Photo: Volunteer Health Workers in Ikoha community visiting a woman who newly put to bed, reminding her to take child for to PHC for necessary Immunisation

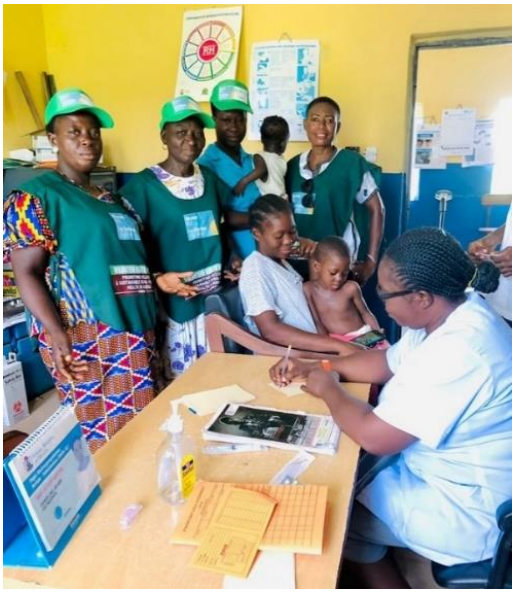
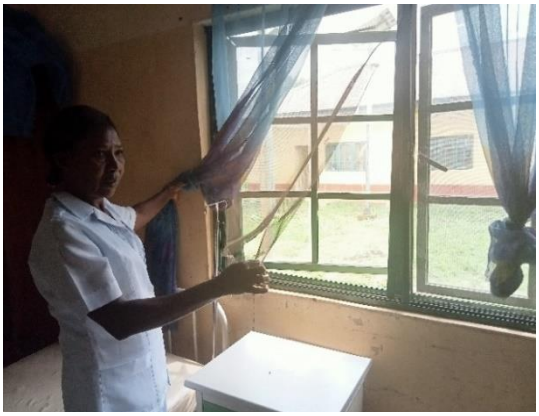


Photo: The VHWs in Akpata community accompanied a referred sick baby and her mother to the healthcare facility, where the facility head personally attended to the child's medical needs

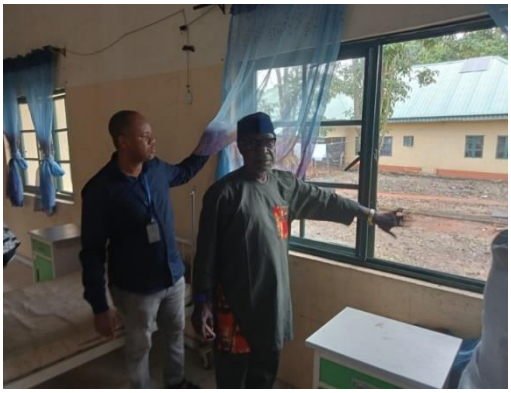
Other Intervention Activities

Support for the Renovation of Health Facilities in Project Communities

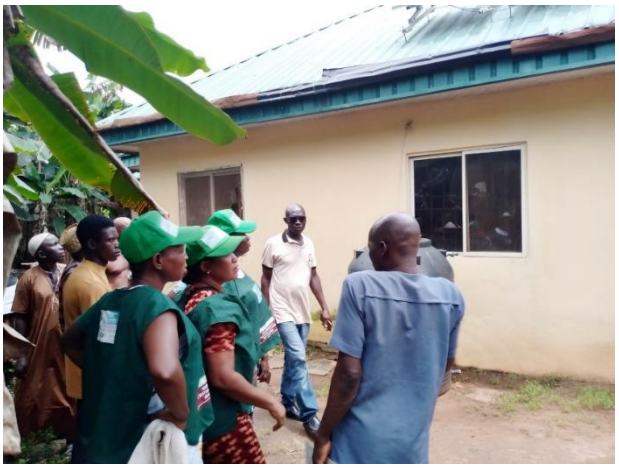
Providing quality health care in rural community is one major challenge that continues even after the VHWs have referred women and girls to the primary health care. Baseline data collected from these project locations indicated that the majority of PHCs were failing to meet the required standards for service delivery, infrastructure, and quality of care. Several factors contributed to this decline, with chronic underfunding being a primary cause. Years of neglect have led to dilapidated buildings, outdated and malfunctioning medical equipment, and a general lack of essential medicines and supplies. As a result, these health facilities were severely underutilized, as community members lost confidence in their ability to provide adequate healthcare. In response to this challenge, the project team, in collaboration with the CPICs, recognized the critical need for intervention, which was the renovation of the PHC facilities. Restoring these centres did not only improve access to healthcare but also restore trust in the system, encouraging more community members to seek care when needed. The goal of the renovation efforts was to create a welcoming, functional, and well-equipped environment that would increase patronage and improve overall health outcomes in the communities. During joint assessments, the project team and CPICs toured several PHCs and conducted outreach programs to gather input from community members. The visits confirmed that these facilities were in dire need of repair, and the areas for intervention were prioritized based on their potential to enhance service delivery. The renovation efforts focused on improving both the physical infrastructure and the availability of medical supplies, with the aim of increasing community trust in the healthcare system.



A Nurse holding a torn window mosquito net in the health facility in Idoko community, Etsako East LGA



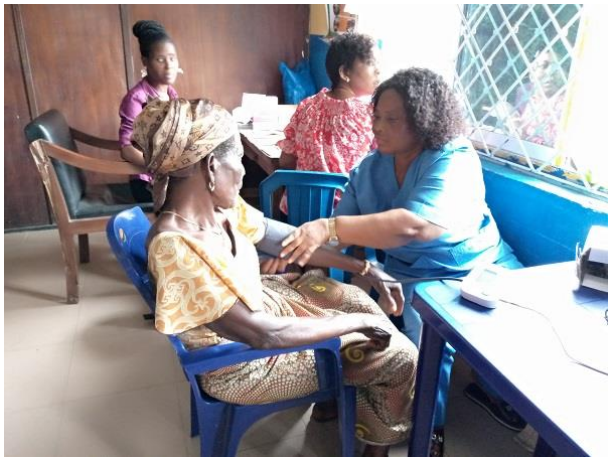
Community Chief inspecting the newly installed window mosquito nets in the health facility in Idoko community, Etsako East LGA



VHWs inspecting the newly painted health facility in Ikoha community, Ovia southwest LGA.

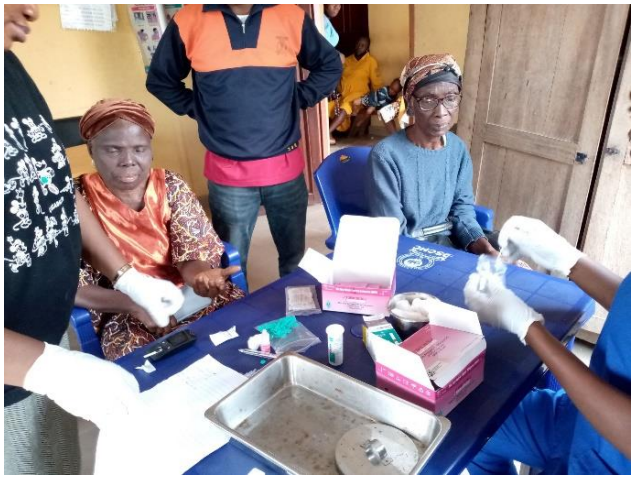
Support for Free Medical Screening and Drugs Distribution in Project Communities

Women in rural communities especially in the project communities, faces enormous challenges regarding their health. The pandemic significantly increased their workload as caregivers and providers within households, leading to a decline in their own health and wellbeing. Baseline data collected during the project's preliminary research revealed that many women, despite facing various health issues, were not utilizing the available primary healthcare services (PHCs). Many are unaware of the health services available at PHCs or cannot afford them, resulting in delayed treatment for common yet serious conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and malaria. This delay in seeking care has contributed to a decline in their health status over time. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the project team with recommendations from the community based formed group (CPIC) provided free medical screenings and drugs as part of the intervention to promote health awareness and improve the utilization of PHC services. This is important as to ensure that women can access the care they need, identify existing health issues early, and receive appropriate treatment. The primary aim of this intervention was to create awareness about the importance of routine health checkups, improve healthcare utilization in the communities, and address the immediate medical needs of women, particularly those at risk of life-threatening ailments. Some of the tests carried out were blood pressure check, blood sugar level check, malaria parasite test, and breast cancer self-examination.



Medical screening of a community member at Irri health facility, Irri, Isoko south LGA

Following the screenings, participants who tested positive for any of the conditions were provided with the necessary medications free of charge. The drugs distributed were aimed at treating the most common conditions identified during the screenings—hypertension, diabetes, and malaria—as well as providing antenatal care for pregnant women.



Dispensing of drugs to some women in one of the project communities

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About CPED

The Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit and non-governmental research and development organisation based in Benin City, Nigeria. CPED is committed to promoting sustainable development, reducing poverty and inequality, and strengthening evidence-based decision-making through policy-oriented research, advocacy, capacity building, stakeholder engagement and community-level intervention programmes.

Vision

The vision of Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) is to be a key non-state actor in the promotion of grassroots development among the inhabitants of various communities in Nigeria.

Mission

The overall mission of Centre for Population and Environmental Development (CPED) is to promote action-based research programmes and undertake intervention programmes on sustainable population and environmental issues in Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta in particular.

Core Values

In order to achieve the vision and mission, CPED staff will be guided by a set of core values designed to motivate staff towards professional excellence, intellectual competitiveness, innovation and productivity. The core values include the following:

- Intellectual Freedom: The universal ideals of intellectual and academic freedom are promoted and respected by CPED. In this respect CPED will remain an independent, professional and non-membership organization.

- Non-partisanship: CPED is a non-partisan organization which is not associated with any political party or organization. However, when the need arises, CPED in its research, advocacy and outreach activities will address key political issues that have considerable impact on development, especially at the local level.

- Quality of service delivery: CPED is committed to excellence in research, advocacy and outreach programmes. This is essential to put CPED on the highest pedestal of policy research think tank in Nigeria. Consequently, quality service delivery is a non-negotiable feature of all the key organs and units of CPED.

- Integrity: CPED staff are committed to the highest ethical standards in all official obligations and personal responsibilities to society and the organization. Integrity shall be manifested through honesty, trustworthiness, honouring commitments and taking full responsibility for our actions, both success and failures.

- Teamwork: CPED emphasizes teamwork, networking and partnership without frontiers.It defeats any tendency towards hero-worshiping, pigeon-holing and stonewalling which make development a mirage.

- Participatory decision-making: This bottom-up and horizontal approach to development planning makes feasible the collective ownership of programmes and all the processes of governance. It makes CPED, policy makers and beneficiaries of development to share a common vision of the public good work mutually for its realization.

- Non-discrimination: CPED is committed to a policy of non-discrimination and equal opportunity for all persons regardless of race, colour, religion, creed, gender identity or disability. CPED respects all applicable laws regarding non-discrimination.