

Social development case study:

Strengthening community voice on health issues

In Nigeria, the Government is widely perceived to be failing in its responsibility to deliver essential services. Yet ideas about rights to public services are relatively new and have yet to translate into a broad-based consumer action or advocacy movement, or into individual consumer initiatives to call service providers to account.

Acknowledging that it faces a significant challenge in rebuilding public confidence in health services, Kaduna state in the North West of the country is testing out a number of strategies that aim to increase consumer voice on health issues and to build accountability between service providers and the communities they serve. One such strategy is strengthening the capacity of Facility Health Committees. Health Partners International helped design this initiative in 2006 and is currently supporting its implementation.

Assessing activities, achievements and challenges

With the support of Health Partners, the Kaduna State Ministry of Health (SMOH), working in partnership with the Ministries of Women's Affairs and Local Government, began by commissioning a rapid assessment to look at the extent to which health committees were still active in the state, their achievements and the challenges they faced. The assessment also looked at the degree of community and local government support for health committees, and at ideas about how the committees' role could change or be extended to increase community voice on health issues.

The findings were illuminating. Although health committees had existed for many years in Kaduna, many had fallen into inactivity, largely due to their over-dependence on external sources of funding. However, those that were still active commonly had significant track records of supporting underfunded and under-staffed health facilities to deliver better services (Box 1 provides an example of one such successful committee).

Tudun Wada Community Health and Development Committee

During the initial 2006 assessment of the work of Facility Health Committees, Mallam Sani Nabawa, Secretary of the Tudun Wada Community Health and Development Committee, outlined the wide range of activities in which the committee had been involved over the last 10 years in support of the local health clinic. A new ward comprising five beds was built with community contributions in 1996. Five trained traditional birth attendants (TBAs) have been recruited by and are paid for by the committee as a response to severe staff shortages. Equipment such as BP machines, scales and scissors are purchased when needed, and the committee pays the clinic's electricity bill to prevent in-patients being left in the dark at night.

In the absence of a sustainable supply of essential drugs from government, the committee also runs a drug revolving fund scheme, purchasing drugs and selling them at a subsidised price. It charges women a small levy for delivery of their babies. This and any drug fund profits are used to fund the activities undertaken by the committee.

The committee members are also involved in outreach, with the aim of encouraging women to use the health facility. However, although very active and dedicated, the committee recognises that it cannot bring about all the required changes on its own, and that a partnership with government is needed.

The rapid assessment identified strong support at community level for revitalising health committees. For example, women from Ungwar Fari village (see photo) who were consulted during the rapid assessment exercise welcomed an initiative that would provide a formal mechanism through which women could have a say on health issues. One woman said: *"We would go house to house and talk to the women about health issues and what they need... if there were a hundred men on the committee and only one woman, I would be happy to participate.... I don't mind, even if it means going to Abuja to see [the president]."*



Women from Ungwar Fari village, who would welcome the opportunity to increase their say on health issues

Consensus on the importance of Facility Health Committees

The findings of the rapid assessment were discussed in a consensus-building workshop involving state and local government staff from three ministries, representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), traditional rulers, and representatives of Facility Health Committees. It was agreed that supporting health committees was an essential health systems strengthening activity, and should be a priority for the state ministry of health. Following the meeting, a training and mentoring programme for health committees was designed, and implementation of the Kaduna Facility Health Committee Strengthening Initiative began in early 2007.

The rapid assessment identified the need to broaden the role of the health committees beyond their traditional focus on supporting community-based immunization programmes, managing drug revolving funds, and raising funds in support of facility infrastructure improvements. Capacity-building support to the health committees has also focused on what it means to represent community views, how to identify and reach the poor and under-served, ensure women's involvement, and how to effectively lobby health managers and elected representatives to ensure that health issues remain on local political agendas. The health committees have also been trained to undertake their own surveys of community perceptions of the quality of health services, and to work closely with their local health facility to find solutions to problems they identify.

The Kaduna state government envisages that the strengthening of Facility Health Committees will lead to the following:

- Communities playing a more active role in ensuring better health for all
- Communities feeling that they have a stronger say in how health services are managed and delivered
- Communities feeling that health providers are more accountable to them
- Health services being more responsive to patient needs
- Health services reaching the very poor and the under-served
- Better representation of women's views and perspectives on health issues.

To ensure sustainability, work is underway to build strong community-level support for the activities of the committees through a variety of communications activities such as radio programmes. A monitoring system has been established to track the progress of the health committees and lessons learned from their experiences will be widely shared. There are also plans to build ongoing mentoring support to the committees into the work of the State Integrated Supervision Team, the team that supervises and monitors the work of health facilities on an ongoing basis.

It is hoped that over time health services in Kaduna will become more responsive to client needs, and that utilisation rates will increase. In a context where downward accountability of health providers to communities is extremely weak, this initiative holds much promise for ensuring that communities have a stronger voice in relation to the delivery of an essential public service.