

# HSIS

GAVI CSO Platform  
Issue 04, 2024

## Challenging Cultural and Religious Barriers: Enhancing Child Immunization in Communities

Community Efforts Lead to 89 Percent Vaccination Coverage in Blantyre

**Demand health services, communities told**

## Newsletter

Community Participation is Vital in Scaling Up Equitable Access to Vaccines for Under-Five Children in Marginalized Communities.

**MHEN Calls Men to Boost Child Vaccine Coverage**

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## ED'S NOTE

**George Jobe, MHEN**

**D**EAR READERS,  
Welcome to another issue of our newsletter, where we bring you inspiring stories of community-driven health initiatives making a lasting impact across Malawi. In this edition, we highlight the remarkable work of Mother Care Groups (MCGs) in some of the country's most remote areas. From constructing under-five clinics to driving up vaccination rates, these grassroots organizations are truly transforming healthcare access for children and mothers.

We want to take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Health for their ongoing support and guidance. Special thanks also go to GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, whose funding has made much of this progress possible. Furthermore, we extend our gratitude to the district health officers from Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mchinji, Dowa, Ntchisi, Kasungu, Mzimba North, Mzimba South, and Chitipa, for their assistance with transport and human resources. Their commitment to collaboration has been essential to the success of these programs.

In addition, we acknowledge the invaluable role played by the MHEN network member organizations and Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs), who have worked tirelessly alongside the MCGs. Together, they are championing better healthcare access and ensuring no child is left behind.

The resilience and collaboration demonstrated by communities like Kawalika, Mkoma, and Kazgola are proof that local action, combined with strong support, can address healthcare disparities and improve outcomes for all. From lobbying for infrastructure improvements to tracking vaccine defaulters, MCGs are playing a pivotal role in safeguarding the future of Malawi's children.

As you read through these stories, we hope you are inspired by the dedication and perseverance of these groups. Their efforts not only align with our nation's goals of achieving universal health coverage but also reinforce our shared vision of promoting child well-being and equity in healthcare.

Thank you for your continued support, and we look forward to sharing more success stories in the future.

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#### GRAPHICS & LAYOUT

By Christer Kalukusha

**W**E can not talk about health without talking about immunization.

While immunization is one of the important aspects for the foundation of one's health life, it is often taken lightly and associated with so many misinformation.

Kasungu District is one of the districts that had suffered so long with the reluctance of mothers to take children for vaccination, myths and beliefs surrounding vaccines.

However, this is now a song of the past for Kasungu with the coming of Mother Care Groups (MCGs) established through Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) to coordinate immunization in the district.

In 2019, MHEN an alliance of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) with financial support from the Global Alliance on Vaccination and Immunisation (Gavi) through the Ministry of Health embarked on a project to combat the reluctance of women to get their children immunized in hard-to-reach areas.

MHEN trained 35 groups of community women in Kasungu, comprising of 30 women each group, and named these MCGs.

MHEN empowered these women to advocate and educate fellow mothers on the importance of child health including immunization.

MCG's in Kasungu upon being trained embarked on a journey to coordinate child immunisation, educating fellow mothers on the importance of vaccine and advocating for improved service delivery regarding immunization. The women conduct personal visits to mothers, while others mobilised resources to build structures for improved service delivery towards immunization.

Chanthunthu MCG in Traditional Authority (TA) Wimbe and Miyowe MCG in TA Chulu are some of the MCGs who have built a clinic and a

## Increasing immunization rates through MCGs



HSA immunizing a child in Kasungu

nurse's house respectively to bring immunization closer to their community.

The two MCG's embarked on this initiative to lessen the distance travelled by mother's in their communities to the nearest health centre for vaccination.

Residents of Chanthunthu used to travel a distance of 18 kilometres to and from Gogode Health Centre while Miyowe travelled 25 Kms to and from Chulu Health Centre which made others reluctant.

According to Ministry of Health, the recommended distance for one to travel to access health care is a minimum of 5 kms.

Kasungu District Environmental Health Officer (DEHO), Rudolph Zinkanda said the MCG are instrumental to the district when it comes to immunization and working together with them has brought a tremendous change in as far as immunization rates is concerned in the district.

"We used to have immunization rates of around 60-70 percent but in the recent years our immunization rates have gone up to 85 percent which is a great

achievement to us a district," he said.

Last year, the District Hospital as recognised by the Ministry of Health as one of the districts doing better on immunization and was awarded for that.

The DEHO attributed this achievement to the support rendered by the MCG's in the district.

He gave an example of the polio vaccine that the district administered indicated that those areas or health facilities with MCG's had immunization rates of up to 95 percent.

MHEN is so far impressed with the results shown through the MCG's.

This was evident through a visit to Miyowe MCG which has proven to be a success in as far as immunization is concerned due to the remarkable work that the mothers are doing in making sure that every child is vaccinated and ensuring good health of their communities.

The success of MCGs in increasing immunization rates in districts underscores the impact community engagement has in public health initiatives.

## Empowering Mothers to Boost Immunization in Mzimba: A Game-Changer for Child Health

By James Nyirenda

**T**RAINING OF MOTHER CARE GROUPS (MCGs) has been hailed as a game-changer in reaching under-vaccinated children in Mzimba. Mothers in these groups appreciate the skills and capacity they've gained. Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN), with support from GAVI Alliance and Ministry of Health, is leading a Health Systems and Immunization Strengthening project to ensure all under-five children are immunized against preventable diseases.

Mzimba, one of Malawi's largest districts, is difficult to access due to poor road networks and remote distances to health facilities. To address this, MHEN is strengthening the capacity of MCGs to raise awareness and follow

**Mother Care Groups have become a lifeline for ensuring every child in even the most remote areas has access to life-saving vaccines. Through their dedication and community engagement, we are breaking down barriers to immunization, one family at a time."**

— Florence Khonyongwa, MHEN Monitoring and Evaluation Officer

up with women whose children have not been vaccinated. This has increased vaccination coverage and made access to vaccines more sustainable.

In Mathandani, 12 MCGs have been trained to engage communities and raise vaccine awareness. MHEN's Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Florence Khonyongwa, emphasizes, "We are to monitor what MCGs have done since their establishment in 2019. They are receiving refresher training on community vaccination and health care delivery."

MHEN's efforts align with national strategies like "Reaching Every Child" (REC), which aims for 80% immunization coverage at the district level and 90 percent nationally. REC focuses on building capacity at the health facility level to improve vaccine access. The Period Intensification of Routine Immunization (PIRI) strategy also supports this goal by increasing both provision and utilization of immunization.

Charles Chingwala, a board member of MHEN, expresses satisfaction with the training: "The reports we receive at a high level reflect exactly what's happening on the ground." He is optimistic about the positive impact of MCGs.

"MCGs are there, we have evidence, the documents are available, and for this, I am very impressed," says Caroline Thole, chairperson of the Mathandani MCG. She adds that the project has helped reduce diseases like cholera and chickenpox, though mobility challenges remain for the women in these groups during their community engagement efforts.



Honing skills and knowledge, a cross section of participants at Mathandani primary school during the first day of the training on increasing vaccination coverage.

# MCGs responding to community mobilization

By Collings Kalivute



Miyowe Mother Care Group

MOTHERS CARE GROUPS (MCGs) in Kasungu have responded favourably to community mobilization affecting health issues in the country.

Kasungu District Health Office has stressed the significance of involving MCGs in every stage in mitigating emergencies.

District's Environmental Health Officer (DEHO) for Kasungu, Rudolph Zinkanda Banda said MCGs are instrumental in improving the uptake of immunization among the citizenry, saying they break stereotypes associated with health issues in a society.

He noted with the support from MCGs, the district has registered a significant increase in the uptake of routine and supplementary immunization activities.

"MCGs are mothers who are trained to assist and mobilize fellow women to bring their children for immunization during immunization sessions and clinics. These groups have helped to increase immunization uptake in our district, and we commend the Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) for introducing these groups," the DEHO outlined.

According to Zinkanda-Banda, the uptake of Supplementary Immunization Activities (SIA) and routine

immunization in Kasungu stands at 95 percent and 85 percent respectively, and attributed the milestone to the groups involvement from within their communities.

Chairperson of Miyowe MCG in the area of Senior Chief Chulu, Modester Ndolo said with technical supervision from MHEN, the 35-member group has managed to curb cases of antenatal,

maternal, and neonatal deaths.

She revealed that the group has managed to build a house for the nurse at their under-five clinic, a development that she said has improved provision of health services among women and children in the area.

"We observed that nurses used to travel at least 25 kilometres from our nearby Health Centre to our under-five clinic. This has been affecting provision of quality health services to our women and children hence opted to build this modern house at our facility," Ndolo said.

According to Kasungu District Health Office's Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) Coordinator, Kondwani Mutowa, besides myths, misconceptions, and religious beliefs, understaffing was one of the challenges affecting the effective administration of immunization in the district.

"Despite registering an increase in the uptake of immunizations in our district, we are facing the challenge of inadequate supervision of immunization providers due to understaffing," he lamented.

MHEN's Project Officer, Maness Chitumba has pleaded with the government to utilize MCGs in responding to emergency health issues, arguing they help Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs) in advocating for change towards myths and misconceptions.

MHEN, in partnership with the Good Health Organization in Kasungu, is implementing a Health System Strengthening Immunization (HSSI) project with financial support from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) through the Ministry of Health.

The project is being implemented in nine districts of Kasungu, Lilongwe, Dowa, Mchinji, Blantyre, Chitipa, Mzimba North and Mzimba South.

# From Training to Triumph: The success Story of Kawalika's Mother Care Group

By Moses Chilumpha

THE Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN), in collaboration with the Lilongwe District Health Office, recently conducted a three-day monitoring visit to Mother Care Groups (MCGs) in Kawalika, Mtandire Msiliza, and Namikango from September 10 to 12, 2024. This visit followed refresher training sessions held in June 2024.

In Kawalika village, under Traditional Authority Khongoni, the Kawalika Mother Care Group reported significant benefits from the training provided by Mhen

Faidesi Chirambo, a group member, explained their major achievement: successfully lobbying for community and chief support to build a village clinic.

"The major achievement so far is that we were able to lobby for support from chiefs and community members to build a village clinic, which we successfully achieved," said Faidesi Chirambo.

Loveness Smart, another group member, echoed Chirambo's sentiments, noting a reduction in maternal and expectant mother deaths since the group's formation.

"Previously, there were high rates of maternal and expectant mothers' deaths, but now we can happily say that due to our presence in the community and the training we received, we have been advising expectant mothers on the importance of delivering at the hospital," she explained.

Alinet Hisman, the chairlady of the group, acknowledged their successes but also highlighted ongoing challenges. "We have managed to build this clinic, but we don't have chairs, and it is not cemented. We also don't have a house for the Health

Surveillance Assistant, who currently stays about six kilometres away, which is too far."

Alinet, a dedicated healthcare worker, pointed out the pressing challenges faced by the village clinic, particularly the lack of mobility and refrigeration.

"Following up with mothers, whether for routine check-ups or urgent visits, becomes a significant issue when we don't have enough bicycles. We also have to travel to Malembo Health Center to store our vaccines, which is far from ideal. A refrigerator for safe vaccine storage is desperately needed," she explained.

Fakina Kalambo, a member of the Mtandire Msiliza group, shared their journey since the group's inception in February 2020. Despite the challenges, they have made significant strides thanks to the training they received.

"We have increased the turnout of children for under-five services from one



(Top) A mother and a child in Mtandire  
(Bottom) Kawalazika MCG

thousand to four thousand five hundred. Through the lobbying skills we acquired, we also managed to open village clinics at Maria Thandizi Parish and Chimombo Center," Kalambo said.

In addition to these successes, the group also constructed Chimbaleme Bridge with the help of partners they reached out to.

"Community members struggled to access vaccination and other services during the rainy season because the bridge was dilapidated and dangerous. We reached out to the ward committee, who connected us with Councilor Ruth Chingwala. With her help, we constructed the bridge, solving the problem," she explained.

"The training we received also opened our eyes to the importance of collaborating with other partners, and it has been effective. We have also established three shelters: Chigoneka, Maria Nthandizi, and Chimombo," Kalambo added

McLean Nkhoma, the District Extended Program on Immunization (EPI) coordinator from the Lilongwe District Health Office, acknowledged the milestones achieved by the groups.

Kombesi Gomile from the Malawi Health Equity Network added that continued support and collaboration are essential for overcoming these challenges and sustaining the progress made.



Men actively participating in the promotion of immunization services

# MHEN Calls Men to Boost Child Vaccine Coverage

By Petro Mkandawire

**H**ELBERT CHAKWAWA, Assistant Project Officer for the Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN), has called on men to take an active role in child health to ensure broader vaccine coverage for children under five.

Chakwawa made this appeal on Wednesday during a supervision tour of the Chitsime and Wambila Mother Care Groups in Blantyre, formed under the Health Strengthening Immunization System Project to enhance the distribution and access to quality health services.

Speaking during the tour, Chakwawa noted that traditionally, women are responsible for taking children to the hospital. He emphasized the need for men to support vaccine coverage by advocating for and encouraging women to bring their children for vaccination.

“Gender-related barriers and inequalities can prevent men from actively participating in child vaccine coverage. However, their involvement is crucial for successful child vaccination and immunization. As heads of families, men make key decisions, including those related to health,” Chakwawa stated.

Chakwawa expressed satisfaction with the involvement of mother-care groups in child health issues, noting their significant contribution to wider vaccine coverage. He assured that MHEN would continue to ensure every child receives necessary vaccinations.

Dr. Gloria Mdachi, Senior Medical Officer at the Blantyre District Health Office, praised MHEN’s intervention in child vaccination. She noted that the introduction of mother-care groups has had a positive impact on vaccine coverage.

Dr. Mdachi added that men are ideal champions for this cause and have the

potential to significantly improve vaccine coverage. She emphasized that men’s involvement is crucial for achieving 100 percent child immunization coverage.

“Initially, our district’s vaccination coverage was below 80 percent before MHEN introduced mother care groups to boost vaccination rates for children under five. The district has now achieved 89 percent coverage,” said Dr. Gloria Mdachi, expressing hope that the impact will be even greater if men take an active role in promoting child vaccination.

The Health Strengthening Immunization System Project is being implemented in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Ntchini, Dowa, Ntchisi, Kasungu, Nzimba South, Nzimba North, and Chitipa by MHEN through the Ministry of Health, with funding from GAVI amounting to 3 million US dollars.

The project includes 33 mother care groups in Blantyre.



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## VACCINATION SUCCESS IN NTCHISI:

Thanks to the work of Mother Care Groups (MCGs), vaccination coverage in Ntchisi district has risen to over 85%, greatly improving children's health in remote areas.



# EMPOWERING WOMEN: Collaborative Strategies to Combat Vaccine-Preventable Diseases

By Christer Kalukusha

**A**T Malomo Health Centre in Ntchisi district, 23-year-old Fales Felix from Chipendeka Village has just given birth. She's ensured her baby has received all necessary vaccines. "It is important that the child receives the vaccines. They make him healthy and he will not be attacked by different vaccine-preventable diseases," she explains. As a member of Msolokera Mother Care Group (MCG), Fales encourages parents to vaccinate their children.

Msolokera MCG, located 40 km from Ntchisi Boma, was established in 2019. Before, many children missed vaccinations, leading to frequent infant deaths. "In the past, women were not aware of the significance of vaccinations... Deaths of infants were very common, but that is now history,"

says MCG chairperson Sophilet Rodrick. Senior Group Village Headman Chiwinga supports the MCG's work, helping to change cultural and religious attitudes toward vaccination. "Whenever we get reports that some people are making the work difficult, we invite them and advise them... In most cases, people change their attitude," he says.

Ching'amba MCG, 20 km from Chiwinga village, has successfully lobbied for infrastructure improvements, including securing a refrigerator for vaccine storage. "In the past, it was difficult for our HSAs to get vaccines. The refrigerator has eliminated those problems," says chairperson Anna Selemani.

Ching'amba and Msolokera are part of 30 MCGs established by MHEN through the Health Systems and Immunization Strengthening (HSIS)

project, funded by GAVI. The project operates in eight districts, including Ntchisi, where vaccination coverage has risen to over 85%. "The MCGs have been on the forefront in providing vaccines in hard-to-reach areas," says Mavuto Guma, Ntchisi District Hospital Cold-chain Technician.

**“**It is important that the child receives the vaccines. They make him healthy and he will not be attacked by different vaccine-preventable diseases.”

— Fales Felix, Member of Msolokera Mother Care Group.

## Mchinji improves child immunisation uptake

By Brighton Chimsinde

MCHINJI district has registered a 90 percent under five children immunisation uptake.

District Environmental Health Officer (DEHO) Robson Kayira has attributed this to the existence of Mother Care Groups (MCGs) working in the district. MCG is a local association of volunteer women tasked with registering and following up on childhood immunisation and pregnant women

"The introduction of MCGs has brought in significant impact through advocacy and mobilisation which have increased immunisation uptake. The MCG members know every household that has vaccine eligible children," Kayira said recently during a media tour to appreciate the role of MCGs in Ministry of Health's Extended Program on Immunisation (EPI). The tour was organised by the Center for Research and Development Initiative (CERADI) with financial support from the Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN).

He confidently said all eligible children have been vaccinated because MCG members volunteered to track and convince their care givers on the importance of vaccination, "Initially, EPI didn't produce desirable results because there was no MCGs involvement."

CERADI Executive Director, Tambosi Phiri said her organisation in partnership with MHEN is doing everything possible to reach out to every child, including those in hard-to-reach areas with timely vaccination.

She however pointed out the dropping out of MCG members as a major challenge, requesting government to consider strengthening volunteer motivation considering the essential work they are doing at grassroots level.

Mchinji currently has 30 MCGs.

# Advocating for Infrastructure to Boost Immunisation

By Brenda Buliani

**A**T Malomo Health Centre in Ntchisi district, 23-year-old Fales Felix from Chipendeka Village ensures her newborn has received all vaccines. "It is important that the child receives the vaccines. They make him healthy and he will not be attacked by different vaccine-preventable diseases," she explains. As a member of Msolokera Mother Care Group (MCG),



Fales Felix from Chipendeka Village ensures her newborn has received all vaccines. "It is important that the child receives the vaccines. They make him healthy and he will not be attacked by different vaccine-preventable diseases," she explains. As a member of Msolokera Mother Care Group (MCG),

MCG's efforts. "Whenever we get reports that some people are making the work of these women difficult, we invite them and advise them accordingly... In most cases, people change their attitude," he says.

Ching'amba Mother Care Group, about 20 km from Chiwinga village, also lobbies for infrastructure improvements. Their chairperson, Anna Selemani, shares: "The refrigerator has helped solve the challenges they used to experience when getting vaccines from Malomo Health Centre. In the past, it was difficult for our HSAs to get the vaccines, especially when there was no transportation."

These MCGs are among the 30 established by Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) under the Health Systems and Immunization Strengthening (HSIS) project, funded by GAVI. Thanks to their efforts, vaccination coverage in Ntchisi has risen to over 85%. "The MCGs have been on the forefront in providing vaccines in hard-to-reach areas," says Mavuto Guma, Ntchisi District Hospital Cold-chain Technician.

Robson Kayira, District Environmental Health Officer



Construction of Tsampale Health Post

# From Reluctance to Readiness: How MHEN Transformed Health in Chitipa

By Witness Chipwere

**T**HE Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) has made significant strides in enhancing immunizations and family planning in hard-to-reach rural areas.

Through its Mother Care Groups (MCG) initiative, Mhen has empowered local women to educate their peers on the importance of immunizations and family planning, leading to a notable decrease in maternal and neonatal mortality.

MHEN's outreach programs have successfully encouraged women to attend Under-5 Clinics, ensuring access to essential health services.

During a monitoring ceremony at Naching'anda in Chitipa District on Wednesday, Senior Environmental Health Surveillance Assistant (SEHSA) Jack Mkhala pointed out the initiative's impact on the overall health and socio-economic development of the country.

"The training on Mother Care Groups

has borne fruit," Mkhala said. "Last year, the turnout for parents to get vaccinations was at 74 percent, and now it is at 85 percent. We thank Mhen for the training. Before these sessions, many parents were reluctant to come to the clinic to vaccinate their children, but now every parent is coming with their children, and they even bring their spouses."

Chairlady for Malambwa Mother Care Group, Saida Sichali, noted that the interventions have enabled the community to construct a house for the Health Surveillance Assistant and a clinic.

She praised Mhen for involving chiefs in safe motherhood programs, which have reduced avoidable deaths among women and newborn babies.

"Women from 24 villages no longer have to travel long distances for immunizations, thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Village Health and Development Committees," Sichali

said.

In her remarks, Program Coordinator for the Chitipa Women Forum, Lucy Sulumbu, expressed gratitude for the support provided by MHEN.

She added that the group is optimistic their efforts will continue to positively impact the health and well-being of the population.

"The turnout of mothers to the clinic is very promising," Sulumbu said.

"As partners, we are optimistic about working with Mhen and the government to ensure that children lead healthy lives."

MHEN's five-year project, launched in 2018 and extended to 2024, receives financial support from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). This support is part of global immunization campaigns aimed at saving lives and protecting people's health in 78 lower-income countries, preventing over 17.3 million future deaths.



Malambwa MCG

**“** Last year, the turnout for parents to get vaccinations was at 74 percent, and now it is at 85 percent. We thank Mhen for the training. Before these sessions, many parents were reluctant to come to the clinic to vaccinate their children, but now every parent is coming with their children, and they even bring their spouses.”

— Jack Mkhala, Senior Environmental Health Surveillance Assistant.



Members of Mkoma MCG pointing at their newly constructed under five clinic

## Mother Care Group Leads Construction of Health Worker's House and Under-Five Clinic in Rural Community

By Vanani Nyirenda

**M**OTHERS of child bearing age can now breathe a sigh of relief following the initiative of Mkoma Mother Care Group (MCG) to construct Kazgola under five village clinic in the area of Village Headman Sitima to reduce long distances in accessing get immunization services.

In the area of Mkoma in Mzimba district, communities have had to struggle to travel long distances to Mkoma Health Center to have their under-fives immunized. To solve the health challenge, Mkoma MCG took up an initiative to construct a house for a health Surveillance Assistant close to the under-five clinic.

After months and years of lobbying stakeholders like traditional leaders and Member of Parliament for Mzimba South East Ackson Kalaile Banda, the collective efforts have finally paid off where now mothers can take their children to get immunized.

Chikondi Chisale, Vice chairperson for Mkoma health centre said they were compelled to construct a clinic and a

house for the health surveillance assistant (HSA) to ensure that under five children are receiving vaccines close to their homes.

She hails Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) for training them on how they can lobby and mobilize resources from various stakeholders to support their initiatives especially in the construction of the two structures.

"After our MCG were trained by MHEN we identified issues which needed to be addressed to ensure that under five children are accessing vaccines. We decided to lobby our traditional leaders and our member of Parliament to support our goal of constructing a clinic and a clinic" she notes.

Millicent Moyo agrees with Chisale that women in her area were giving lame excuses petty reasons to avoid accessing vaccines.

"Some women were saying they were failing to let their children access vaccines due to heavy workload in tobacco fields, some were saying the health center is very far hence we started sensitizing husbands on the importance of having their children to access

vaccines to curb vaccine preventable diseases" she observes

Village headman Isaac Ng'oma says traditional leaders felt the need to construct Kazgola village clinic after noting women were travelling a long distance to Mkoma health center mainly in the rainy season when rivers were full making passage difficult.

"Four villages of Ziyakayaka, Sitima Kaunda, Petros Phiri and Ackim Kanyinji agreed to mould bricks and construct the clinic and a house, now our women do not have to endure long distance to Mkoma, even those with other illnesses access services at the clinic" explains Ng'oma

Doreen Mvula, health surveillance assistant at Kazgola under-five clinic says Mkoma MCG has made a difference in the area as in the past, mothers were conducting under five clinics in the open exposed to wind and inclement weather conditions.

She concurred with Chisale that in the past turn up for immunization services was very low but now turn up has increased as on clinic days more than 200 women turn up.



Dunda MCG

## Demand Health Services, Communities Told

By George Singini

**A**CCESS to quality health care is a right for everyone but communities in rural areas continue to face challenges in accessing health services due to long distances.

The most affected are children and women in particular expectant women. Children, under five, need to access vaccines to promote immunity and fight diseases.

Through Mother Care Groups (MCGs) that have been put in place, communities are able to lobby for services.

Communities in Kapyola Village in the area of Traditional Authority (TA) Njombwa attest to the impact the project has had on their lives and hope for a better future.

Through Dunda MCG, the communities now have an under five clinic facility including a house for a

Health Surveillance Assistant (HSA).

Dunda MCG Chairperson, Christina Salangwa said the construction of the under-five clinic and a house for a HSA was a starting point of having a proper health facility in the area to promote access to health services.

She viewed that the structures constructed are promoting immunization of children.

"Previously the clinic was taking place under a tree. When it rains, the service was being disrupted. We also constructed a house for the health surveillance assistant so that we should have the officer based here. With the bad road, it is difficult for a health surveillance to be commuting," Salangwa said.

However, there was need for a Fridge for storing the vaccines so that they are readily available.

The MCG ambition is that there should be a health centre in the area to

promote access to quality health services.

Salangwa said MCG has now started engaging authorities to consider constructing a health centre.

"The distance to the nearest health facility puts lives at risk. We are mostly worried with cases of expectant mothers and children," Salangwa added.

A community member, Agnes George of Kapyola village of Traditional Authority (TA) Njombwa said the presence of the clinic and MCG was encouraging communities to get children vaccinated.

She laments that lack of a health centre in the area is heavily affecting communities. She says communities spend a lot of money to travel to nearest health facility.

MHEN Project Officer, Kumbesi Gomile has called on communities to continue engaging authorities on the health centre project.

He saluted the communities for embracing the project and being proactive in development.

Gomile observed that communities are taking initiatives to construct health facilities including houses for health surveillance assistants in order to bring health services closer to the community.

"The MCGs are helping to promote access to quality health services by lobbying authorities to construct under five clinics, provide solar powered refrigerators for storing vaccines, constructing health surveillance houses in some hard to reach areas," he said.

Kasungu District Extended Programme for Immunization (EPI) Coordinator, Joseph Chisime said construction of under-five clinics, construction of HSAs houses and the placement of refrigerators in hard to reach areas have made it easy for authorities to carry out immunization programme.

He concurred with communities in Kapyola village on the need to have a health post nearby adding he would refer the concerns of communities to relevant authorities.

## Challenging Cultural and Religious Barriers: Enhancing Child Immunization in Communities

By Christer Kalukusha

**C**OMMUNITIES of Msolokera village in Traditional Authority Masanya in Ntchisi district have been grappling with low numbers of fully immunized children, for years the community has lost under-five children to vaccine preventable diseases due to lack of knowledge and cultural beliefs, but with the coming of mother care groups, the people are now seeing positive change.

The community had been engulfed with fear on the rumours spread about vaccines. Myths and beliefs were stuck in the people's heads causing deaths which could have been prevented.

This changed with the arrival of Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) in the district. Upon recognizing the power of community engagement, MHEN embarked on a programme of educating and empowering women on the importance of immunization. With funding from Global Alliance on Vaccination and Immunization (GAVI), MHEN facilitated community trainings filled with immunization advocacy in 9 districts across Malawi and Ntchisi being one of them.

Women of Solokera were trained on the importance of immunization and Chiyanjano Mother Care Group (MCG) emerged; a grouping of 30 women to advocate and help curb the unknown fears surrounding vaccination and coordinate vaccination in their locality.

With the empowerment and knowledge from the training Chiyanjano MCG helped Solokera and surrounding villages open their eyes and welcomed the idea of vaccination with full understanding.

"MHEN has really saved our community, there has been a reduction on under-five mortality rates in our

village, parents also understand the importance of vaccine, they have left behind all the beliefs they had on vaccines and are now responsible to vaccinate their children." Said Chiwinga.

Sophisticated Rodrick, a resident in the village concurred with the chief saying that there was a time when four deaths would occur in a space of one week and the frequent deaths were disrupting development activities. She said some of these deaths were caused by measles which is preventable with vaccines. Now, frequent deaths is now news of the past with the remarkable work of MCGs in educating the masses.

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), immunization is a right of every child and vaccines protect children and adolescents from serious fatal illnesses. For instance, BCG is a vaccine that is administered to children to prevent Tuberculosis (TB) and Measles Rubella is a vaccine that helps to prevent measles.

Florence Phiri Chiyanjano MCG member added that she has learnt a lot from MHEN on the benefits of

vaccination and all the myths associated with immunization have been dispelled.

"We were just getting vaccines ignorantly, for example, I now know that Tetanus vaccine is given to expecting mothers for malaria prevention. Even those who were associating vaccination with satanism no longer believe in such stories and they even help in spreading the importance of vaccine to others in the community," said Phiri.

Preaching this information to the community has really helped mothers to start going for prenatal clinics once they realize that they are expecting to get all the necessary vaccine for the mother's protection as well as the baby.

MHEN Program Officer, Kumbesi Gomile said they want to make sure that every child is immunized including those in hard-to-reach areas hence establishing these MCGs which help HSAs in coordinating vaccinations within their vicinity.

"We do realize that raising a healthy child is raising a healthy nation" explains Gomile.



Growth monitoring session at Msolokera Outreach Clinic

# Using Community Engagement as a Transformation Tool

By Christer Kalukusha

**C**OMMUNITIES of Traditional Authority Masanya in Ntchisi are no longer losing their under five children to preventable diseases after embracing vaccinations.

Initially, the community did not understand the importance of vaccines, but was instead swamped with fears on the fake news about immunisations. This however became fatal as it led to preventable deaths.

Sophisticated Rodrick, a local resident says four child deaths would occur in a week, "This disrupted development activities. Some deaths were caused by measles, which is preventable with vaccines."

This mind-set changed when Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) embarked on a programme to educate and empower women on the importance of immunisation. The programme funded by Global Alliance on Vaccination and Immunization (GAVI) has enabled MHEN to facilitate community trainings

filled with immunization advocacy in and eight other districts across Malawi.

The raining led to the establishment of Chiyanjano Mother Care Group (MCG), a grouping of 30 women to advocate and help demystify fears surrounding vaccination plus coordinate immunisations in their localities.

Using the empowerment and knowledge from the trainings, Chiyanjano MCG enlightened Masanya communities on the importance of child immunisations.

GVH Chawinga says MHEN saved communities, "We have noticed a reduction in under-five mortalities. Parents now understand the importance of vaccines."

Florence Phiri, Chiyanjano MCG member admits mothers' ignorance on the importance of vaccines, "We ignorantly got vaccinated and had our children vaccinated..... With the knowledge upon us, even those who were associating vaccination with Satanism no longer believe in such stories."

Informing the community has really helped mothers to begin going for prenatal clinics immediately after learning they are expecting, so that they do not miss any vaccine to protect them and their unborn child from diseases. After birth, mothers also ensure that their children receive all the required vaccines.

MHEN Program Officer, Kumbesi Gomile says the organisation desires that every child is fully immunised, including those in hard to reach areas hence establishing the MCGs who collaborate with Health Surveillance Assistants in coordinating vaccinations within their vicinity.

"We realise that raising a healthy child is raising a health nation. We are proud of the progress made so far with these MCG's," he said.

The transformation of Traditional Authority Masanya speaks of the vision MHEN has for a healthier Malawi, where every child is vaccinated and free from preventable diseases.

Chiyanjano MCG



Mpendeka MCG

## Community Efforts Lead to 89 Percent Vaccination Coverage in Blantyre

By Petro Mkandawire

**B**LANTYRE DISTRICT ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER (DEHO), Innocent Mvula, has expressed gratitude for the Healthy Strengthening Immunization System Project, saying it has a significant impact on Mother Care groups on improving vaccine coverage among children in the district.

Mvula noted that the vaccination coverage for children under five has seen a remarkable increase, reaching nearly 89 percent in the district.

This is a substantial improvement from the 79 percent coverage recorded before the introduction of the Mother Care groups.

"Mother Care groups have been instrumental in mobilizing resources to enhance immunization coverage here in Blantyre. They serve as our vital link to the communities. Before these groups were established, we faced numerous challenges, such as following up on zero-dose children and a lack of community advocacy for immunization. Now, community participation in

immunization efforts has significantly increased," Mvula explained.

He encouraged communities to take ownership of vaccine service delivery to achieve a healthy bottom-up approach.

Mvula also called on other stakeholders to invest in Mother Care groups, emphasizing their crucial role in improving vaccine coverage.

The Healthy Strengthening Immunization System Project is being implemented in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Ntchinji, Dowa, Ntchisi, Kasungu, Nzimba South, Nzimba North, and Chitipa by MHEN through the Ministry of Health, with funding from GAVI amounting to 3 million US dollars.

The project, which runs from 2018 to 2024, includes 33 Mother Care groups in Blantyre.

Maria Ligawo, vice-chair of the Mpendedeka Mother Care group from Traditional Authority Lundu in Blantyre, shared that they provide vaccines to over 40 children each month. Through their efforts, they have managed to construct an under-five clinic, which has greatly facilitated the immunization process.

"Before immunization services reached our area, most children used to get sick very often, and many women spent their days in hospitals. Now, through our group, we can advocate to families about the importance of vaccines for children under five, and I can say the turnout is good," said Maria Ligawo.

Ligawo highlighted several challenges that need to be addressed, including the lack of transportation to reach distant villages, the need for T-shirts for identification, and the absence of immunization boxes.

The Malawi Health Equity Network (MHEN) is an independent alliance of organizations and individuals dedicated to improving the distribution, quality, and access to health services throughout the country. MHEN promotes equity and quality in health for all people in Malawi.

# Community Participation is Vital in Scaling Up Equitable Access to Vaccines for Under-Five Children in Marginalized communities.

By Wanangwa Tembo

**L**OCATED in the hilly district of Chitipa, Naching'anda Health Post, an under-five clinic under Chisasu Health Centre, perches on the foot of the towering Misuku Hills about 40 Kilometres North-East of the main administrative centre.

The area is one of the hard-to-reach owing to its inaccessibility especially during the rainy season when the road snaking up the mountain ranges become impassable. During the dry season the road is bumpy and dusty making driving and down the hills precarious.

Jack Mkhala, a health surveillance assistant (HSA) at Chisasu Health Center says transport woes impact healthcare delivery in the area as moving health supplies such as vaccines from Chisasu becomes difficult.

"We do not have storage facilities for vaccines. These are kept at the mother facility at Chisasu. This means one has to go there and get them to be administered. But with transport problems, it means if they are not collected on that material day, the administration schedule will have to be adjusted," explains Mkhala.

He says this rescheduling can plant elements of doubt and despair amongst health service users who may in turn not show up again for immunisation.

"Already there are many factors that affect immunisation – some being myths and religious beliefs. So, we must avoid creating more scenarios that would discourage people from coming for immunization," he says.

Through Malambwa Mother Care Group (MCG), some 30 women who are members of the group have volunteered to drive change in the area by streamlining provision of health services

at Naching'anda.

Chairperson for the MCG, Saida Sichali says as volunteers, they conduct campaigns to ensure that mothers take their under-five children for immunisation against various diseases as required.

"We have managed to build a clinic, spacious enough and better than what we initially had. After the clinic project, we embarked on constructing a house for the HSA but it is not yet ready for occupation. We want the HSA to be operating from within and not in rented houses far from the facility which directly derails service delivery," says Sichali

Another member of the group, Christina Mhango, says the group advances peer education on the importance of hospital deliveries, risks associated with home deliveries and importance of vaccination for under-five children.

"We go village by village looking for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children. We check their cards and those found to have missed vaccines, we make



1. (Left) Juma, we want to get to over 90 percent  
2. (Right) Sichali, we want the HSA to be operating from within

sure that they access them. So, generally, our work ensures that communities are fully immunized," she says.

Mhango adds that the group's wish is to have their under-five structure connected to the electricity grid so that they are given their own storage facilities for vaccines to counter transport hitches on the way.

Tamandani Juma is the deputy coordinator for the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), for Chitipa District. She lauds the work of the MCGs saying they have helped to improve immunisation status for the district.

There are 30 MCGs in Chitipa translating to a force of 300 women and 10 chiefs.

"As a district, we were not doing well in terms of immunisation. Records show that before the establishment of MCGs way back in 2018, we were between 50 to 60 per cent.

"This time, we have seen a big improvement. For example, last quarter, we were at 81 percent and this is largely attributed to the work of the MCGs,"



# MHEN IS FIGHTING FOR HEALTHCARE EQUITY.

## Stand with us to ensure every child is vaccinated!





**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION,  
PLEASE WRITE TO**

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