

Zero-dose children in northern Nigeria

Fragile and conflict-affected settings, remote rural areas, and urban slums are common environments where zero-dose children, those who have not received any routine vaccines, are most often concentrated. In northern Nigeria, multiple interconnected strategies work together systematically to reach missed communities and strengthen health care systems, building and sustaining community demand, addressing various barriers and using innovation to ensure that immunisation services reach these children.

Context

- **Security challenges:** Conflicts in northeast Nigeria, banditry in northwest states and safety concerns limiting health worker accessibility can disrupt health services and prevent regular immunisation activities.
- **Geographic barriers:** Road infrastructure challenges, difficult terrain and long distances between communities and health facilities can restrict access to remote communities and limit vehicle access.
- **Vaccine hesitancy:** Concerns about vaccine content and purpose, vaccine safety and government intentions can drive resistance to vaccines.
- **Health system needs:** Boost routine immunisation systems, cold chain infrastructure, number of trained health workers, and supply chain management to strengthen the health systems.
- **Reaching mobile communities:** Challenges tracking cross-border movement between Nigeria and neighbouring countries and in following up with nomadic pastoralist communities, seasonal workers and traders, and mobile families.

Scale of the problem



2.1m

zero-dose children in Nigeria (2023)¹



41%

of child deaths in Nigeria are vaccine preventable²

¹<https://zdlh.gavi.org/country-profiles/nigeria>

²<https://www.healthdata.org/research-analysis/gbd>

What works

- ✓ **Community leadership and trust-building:** Religious and community leaders' endorsement proves more powerful than external messaging, whilst sustained engagement builds lasting trust that improves programme acceptance.
- ✓ **Service delivery optimisation:** Quick entry-exit strategies reduce security risks, and integrating services with other health interventions increases uptake and provides greater value for families.
- ✓ **Workforce development:** Ongoing training maintains quality and motivation, whilst careful supply chain planning addresses coordination challenges.
- ✓ **Community engagement and mobilisation:** Women mobilisers effectively reach mothers, and addressing specific community concerns proves more persuasive than general education.
- ✓ **Mobile population strategies:** Understanding migration patterns enables optimal timing of services, with community preparation essential for operational efficiency.



Credit: Gavi/2023/Nr Dambali

Zero-dose interventions

Zero-dose interventions in northern Nigeria were designed to work synergistically, with each strategy addressing different barriers, creating supportive approaches that amplify overall impact beyond individual programme results.

Programme	How it works	Key success factors
Volunteer Community Mobilisers (VCMs) build trust and maintain community relationships	Community members are recruited and trained to conduct house-to-house visits, maintain vaccination registers, provide health education and build trust through cultural and religious understanding. VCMs serve as bridges between communities and health systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local volunteers with social ties Continuous training on vaccine knowledge and communication skills Integration with religious and traditional leaders Performance-based incentives and recognition systems Supervision with feedback mechanisms Culturally and linguistically appropriate messaging
“Hit-and-run” vaccination strategy reaches conflict zones that VCMs cannot safely access	Coordination with military and security forces provides protection for rapid vaccination deployment in conflict-affected areas. Health teams enter insecure areas, vaccinate children quickly and withdraw to minimise security risks whilst maximising coverage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination between military and health sector leadership Pre-positioning of vaccines and supplies in secure locations Advance notification through traditional authorities Clear command structure and communication protocols Risk assessment and mitigation planning
Border and transit point vaccination reaches mobile populations that fixed services miss	Permanent and semi-permanent vaccination posts are established at border crossings, major markets and transit points to reach mobile populations including nomads, traders, seasonal workers and cross-border communities who might otherwise miss routine services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic site selection based on population movement patterns Coordination with customs, immigration and border security Flexible scheduling to accommodate arrival patterns Communication in local languages Integration with livestock vaccination programmes for pastoralists
Integrated service delivery maximises value when communities engage	Vaccination services are combined with nutrition screening, vitamin A supplementation, deworming, growth monitoring and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) education to maximise community engagement, service efficiency and address multiple child health needs simultaneously.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-training of health workers in multiple service areas Coordinated supply chain management for all services Demand creation emphasising comprehensive child health Partnership coordination between vaccination, nutrition, and WASH programmes Comprehensive record-keeping systems linking all services Standardised protocols for integrated service delivery
Community dialogue and trust building addresses underlying resistance that could undermine all other efforts	Systematic engagement with traditional rulers, religious leaders, women’s groups and community gatekeepers focuses on addressing vaccination misconceptions, building vaccine confidence and creating local ownership of immunisation programmes through respectful dialogue and education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on long-term relationships Address specific community concerns with evidence-based responses Involve respected community voices as champions Vaccine safety transparency Celebrating and sharing local success stories Culturally appropriate communication

This product was produced by the Zero-Dose Story Generation Consortium, led by Sabin Vaccine Institute. Sabin is a leading advocate for expanding vaccine access and uptake globally, advancing vaccine research and development, and amplifying vaccine knowledge and innovation.

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