Nigeria's “historic gain” in the battle against polio

Effective use of debt relief to fight polio

The near eradication of polio in Nigeria has been one of the great development success stories of recent years - and a major step forwards in the use of MDG-related Debt Relief Gains to achieve MDG 4. Some experts have called it “a historic gain against the disease”, a view endorsed by a World Health Organization (WHO) report in March 2010.

There were 333 confirmed cases of polio across 26 states in the first half of 2009 (the full-year total was 388). But by half way through 2010 (week 28), just three cases of wild polio virus 1 (WPV1) and three cases of WPV3 had been confirmed in four states. That's a year-on-year fall of 98 per cent.

Historic declaration

This dramatic progress has been achieved since the Federal Ministry of Health, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Chairman of the Nigerian Governors’ Forum signed the historic Abuja Declaration on Polio Eradication in Nigeria in February 2009. The declaration is a public pledge to mobilise state and local government area (LGA) administrations to achieve a vaccination coverage target of 90 per cent.

At about the same time, traditional leaders throughout the country pledged to support immunisation campaigns and started pushing parents to have their children vaccinated.

How immunisation is carried out

Nigeria calculated that, if it could reach all children under five with the multi-dose vaccine, it could stop transmission of the wild polio virus. To do that, it instituted two immunisation programmes: routine and supplemental.

Routine immunisation

To validate administrative coverage, a data quality self-assessment was conducted during 2009 at 222 health facilities in 111 LGAs. The assessment showed there had been an improvement in cumulative DPT3 coverage (DPT3 is an indicator of how well routine immunisation is performing), with coverage of 79 per cent in 2009, compared with 71 per cent in 2008 and 70 per cent in 2007. In May 2010, cumulative DPT3 coverage was 73 per cent – a figure which illustrates the challenges involved in routine immunisation.

Supplemental immunisation

Supplemental immunisation takes place through Immunization Plus Days (IPDs), which have been held both nationally and at state level during 2010. They have high-level support from state governors and other senior members of government. For example, Mrs Abimbola Fashiola, the wife of the Governor of Lagos State, urged “all our mothers, fathers and caregivers to ensure that their children and wards within the age of 0-5 years are immunised ... The vaccine is free, safe and effective”.

Vaccine security

Two important activities have been completed. First, all routine vaccines in the national Polio Eradication Initiative (PEI) schedule were procured, distributed and used. Second, the national cold-storage chain was assessed to understand its status and gaps in storage capacity, as well as to prepare for the planned introduction of new vaccines: Global Alliance for Vaccines (GAVI) had granted conditional approval to introduce Hib pentavalent and pneumo vaccines.
Supplemental immunisation takes place through Immunization Plus Days (IPDs)

Challenges encountered

The first challenge is to overcome continued resistance from some community leaders, as their buy-in is key to sustained success. Successes to date should be a powerful tool that campaign leaders can use to persuade and convince.

Sustainability is also a major challenge because, if routine immunisation in the remaining high-risk states, such as Kano, is not stepped up, widespread re-infection may reverse the progress made so far.

Lastly, as noted by WHO, management issues at all levels of the polio eradication campaign are critical barriers to success in Nigeria. A full commitment to the eradication programme is sometimes lacking at LGA level, while immunisation campaigns are sometimes not well implemented and there are, as ever, resource constraints.

Moving forward

As well as being “historic”, Nigeria’s achievement in almost eradicating polio is also a demonstration of the Government’s ability to partner and invest in public health. Polio immunisation is one of the more difficult immunisations to carry out, so there is good potential to use the polio campaign as a springboard for routine immunisation against other major diseases, such as the planned 2011 measles campaign.

A major lesson learned is that the involvement of state governors and LGA chairpersons is crucial for success. The active involvement of religious, traditional and community leaders in the eradication campaign and the excellent collaboration between the Nigerian Government and international development partners (including international philanthropic foundations and bodies) were also key success factors.

Sufficient funding is always likely to be a problem, but successes so far should make it easier not only to obtain funds from partners and key stakeholders, but also to secure their release in a timely fashion.

Key points on polio

- Most recent statistics show that polio has almost been eradicated in Nigeria.
- Six confirmed cases January-July 2010, compared with 388 cases in the whole of 2009.
- Two immunisation programmes - routine and supplemental.
- Vaccines have been delivered and cold-storage chain strengthened.
- Involvement of state governors, LGA chairpersons and traditional rulers is crucial to success.
- Polio programme can be a springboard for tackling other diseases.