

## **THE CAMPAIGN TO KICK POLIO OUT OF NIGERIA**

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

Religion in sub-Saharan Africa is often about saving patients as much as it is about saying prayers. That blend of holy and healthy is on display in Northern Nigeria where the country's religious leadership played a critical role in first preventing and then promoting the campaign to eliminate polio from Africa's largest population.

Dr. Bruce Aylward is the Director of The Global Polio Eradication Initiative. He says people don't realize just how devastating polio can be – it leaves its victims paralyzed for life.

"The acute illness is a very painful disease. The thing that goes unrecognized by many people is that a large proportion of children can actually die of the disease."

Despite decades of vaccination campaigns children are still dying from the disease, particularly in Northern Nigeria.

"If you are a polio virus and there is a global war being waged against you, you are going to look for a large, dense population with low immunization coverage, sub-optimal sanitation, and a tropical climate to survive," says Dr. Aylward. "Those are going to be the keys to your survival and Nigeria had all of those in spades."

The task of defeating the virus got even tougher in 2003 when rumors that the polio vaccine was tainted with sterility drugs and HIV swirled through Northern Nigeria. As concern mounted, Northern Nigeria's traditional and religious leadership was consulted.

Anand Balachandran is the Political Advocacy Officer of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. He says that religious leaders play a huge role in influencing the daily lives of these people.

"They are not driven by what they read in the newspapers. They are driven by what they hear in their mosques and temples. Their lives are very intricately driven by religion."

In a region with a large Muslim majority population, misconceptions and conspiracy theories added a religious dimension to the problem.

"There was a rumor that following 9/11, the U.S. government was waging a war on terrorism against Islamic countries and Islamic communities," explains Balachandran. "[They said] the polio vaccines were laced with sterility products that would sterilize Muslim girls. That was a very, very strong rumor."

By the middle of 2003, many of the states in Northern Nigeria had formally boycotted the polio vaccine. The number of confirmed polio cases soon sky-rocketed. In 2002, there were 202 cases in Nigeria. But in 2004, after just one year of the boycott, that number soared to 782 and the effects were not limited to Nigeria. The highly infectious disease rapidly spread.

Christine McNab is a consultant for the Nigerian Health Ministry. She says that in very crowded and unsanitary conditions, this virus can be transmitted very quickly.

"Children are playing with their soccer ball near the open sewer. If the ball falls in the sewer, the children pick it up and they keep kicking it. Also, there is a lot of migration or informal migration or trade between countries. Once polio takes hold, it can travel very quickly within a community but also across borders."

By 2006, testing showed that polio strains originating in Nigeria had made their way to more than 20 countries in Africa and Asia. Alarm bells went off at the WHO Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

"We were having these urgent meetings quite regularly," says Balachandran. "We had to look at it two ways – what's happening in Nigeria but also how can we plan to protect these other countries? How do we make sure that their children are not suffering because of the situation in Nigeria? It was incredibly tense."

Realizing the importance of getting Nigeria's Muslim leaders onboard, the global initiative reached out to the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

"We wanted to show to the people of Nigeria that what we are doing is not against Islam," says Balachandran. "We worked very hard in terms of influencing the local community by getting fatwas from some of the most renowned Islamic religious scholars from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as to why it is the duty of parents to protect their children. We got a very senior Imam from Senegal with a huge following in Northern Nigeria. He talked to all these Imams using the same fatwa and the same language because the local communities would understand these fatwas better when it came from African religious leaders. He held huge prayer meetings where literally tens of thousands of people attended. He was able to convey these to the local Imams and also to the communities."

This outreach effort combined with several rounds of testing that made clear the vaccine was safe helped convince Northern Nigerian leaders to end the boycott. But misgivings about the vaccine persisted.

"The resolution of the vaccine issue was one thing," says Dr. Aylward. "But what people forget is like in any kind of a big, diverse organization, you may have a command from the top, 'Okay, the vaccine is safe,' but it takes a long time for that to get down through the system."

Dr. Muhammad Ali Pate, Executive Director of the National Primary Health Care Development Agency in Nigeria, made sure religious and traditional leaders were actively engaged.

"We reached out to the traditional and religious institutions in the country to explain and in fact dispel some of the misperceptions that they had before."

By addressing the concerns of traditional and religious leaders, the polio campaign turned skeptics into advocates.

"We built a trusting relationship with the religious institutions to see that there was no alternate motive nor grand conspiracy behind our effort. We are just simply trying to prevent their children from getting paralyzed by the wild polio virus," says Dr. Pate. "Once they were convinced, they started speaking for the vaccination campaigns and in fact contributed to the effort. They were preaching in sermons, in terms of the mosques for instance, that it's important to get children vaccinated. The involvement of these religious institutions in Nigeria has had a major impact."