How USAID DISCOVER-Health’s SBC approach increased COVID-19 vaccine uptake among healthcare workers and got Zambia to 70% eligible population coverage

Authors: Mutolo Mwamba, Advisor SBC(1), Sarah Hatchard, Communications and Knowledge Management Director(1), Melinda McKay, Director-Behavior Initiative(2), Pule Mundende, Advisor-Prevention and Behavioural Interventions(1), Adamson Ndhlovu, Deputy Project Director-Technical Services(1), Dr Mutinta Nyumbu, Deputy Project Director(1)

(1) USAID DISCOVER-Health Project, (2) JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc

Context

In March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Zambia, with the number of cases rising to 1 in July 2020. Traditional healthcare services (THCS) were strained by the surge in new cases, and healthcare providers (HCWs) were overwhelmed. Despite a significant increase in vaccination coverage among the general population, the uptake among HCWs was low. This was due to a number of factors, including a lack of information, fear of side effects, and a lack of trust in the vaccine's safety.

Activity Description

The USAID DISCOVER-Health Project engaged all sectors working on COVID-19 vaccine uptake, initially working with more than 1,500 THCs and HCWs. The project conducted small group discussions with HCWs, which provided insights into the experiences of HCWs during the vaccination drive. Using these behavioral insights, the project supported the adaptation of the Ministry of Health’s (MOH) approach to HCW vaccination by:

• Organizing vaccine information sessions for HCWs, which included targeted messaging based on the insights of the HCD workshops, addressing their concerns and fears.
• Facilitating dialogues between HCWs and the communities they serve, which provided additional information on the vaccine to the public.
• Providing informational resources to HCWs and the communities they serve, including pamphlets, posters, and other materials.

Evidence

The three supported provinces, Central, Copperbelt, and North Western, were among the first to vaccinate HCWs, starting with the Copperbelt in July 2021. The COVID-19 vaccination campaign reached the elderly general population, followed by the lowest risk groups, such as health workers, by December 2021. The vaccination coverage among HCWs was highest in Copperbelt, followed by North Western and Central.

Activity Impact

By November 2021, 95% of the USAID DISCOVER-Health-supported HCWs had been fully vaccinated. The Project was not only successful in supporting the Ministry of Health in vaccinating HCWs, but also in converting them into facilitators of vaccination, leading to a significant increase in vaccination coverage among the general population.

Facilitators

The project’s close partnership with the Government of Zambia and the Ministry of Health provided a framework for the successful implementation of the vaccination campaign. The role of media and influencers played a vital role in promoting vaccination among HCWs and the general population. The project also worked with other stakeholders, such as religious leaders and community health workers, to ensure a comprehensive approach to vaccination.

Lessons Learned

A number of key lessons emerged during the implementation, which can help others when aiming for similar outcomes:

• Empower healthcare workers: HCWs are key to the success of vaccination campaigns. They are trusted by their communities and can influence the uptake of the vaccine.
• Empower community influencers: Community influencers, such as religious leaders and traditional healers, can play a crucial role in promoting vaccination.
• Empower the media: An informed and supportive media was a powerful tool that further enhanced vaccine uptake.

Challenges

Vaccines were developed for a younger target population, to be administered directly to the communities. This initially posed a challenge to get these vaccines distributed. However, with the support of HCWs and community influencers, vaccines were distributed to the general population.

In Zambia, the vaccination campaign faced several challenges, including a lack of vaccine supply, resistance to vaccination, and misinformation. However, through a comprehensive approach that included education, awareness campaigns, and community engagement, the vaccination campaign was successful.

The model of COVID-19 vaccination in Zambia was a success story, showing that effective SBC strategies can lead to high vaccination coverage among HCWs and the general population. It is a lesson for other countries to follow, as it demonstrates that with the right approach, even the most challenging populations can be successfully vaccinated.