

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



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Context

In March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Zambia, with the arrival of vaccines a year later in April 2021. Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs), including facility-based support staff and community health workers (CHWs) were among the first groups prioritized for vaccination. However, there was a significant amount of hesitancy due to beliefs that the vaccine could cause infertility, was the 'mark of the beast', contained a secret tracking device or could lead to death among recipients. There was a continuous spread of such misinformation, which intensified in the four-months between other countries receiving the vaccine and when Zambia's supplies arrived and were first distributed. As a result, an estimated 70% of HCWs prioritized for the first batch of vaccines opted out of being vaccinated, contributing to the low vaccination coverage of less than 10% in the general population before the SBC activities.

Without HCW acceptance to take the vaccine, relying on them for any vaccination campaigns would fail and Zambia would not reach its goal of vaccinating 70% of the eligible population. HCWs are a trusted source of information and pivotal to the delivery of vaccination to the general public. Their buy-in was essential to the success of the vaccine program and to effectively deliver these services.

Following the observed low vaccine uptake among HCWs, the USAID DISCOVER-Health Project, implemented by JSI, worked with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to design and implement an SBC strategy centered on HCWs. This aimed to vaccinate 90% of HCWs and convert them from barriers to facilitators, leading the vaccination effort in their communities. The Activity focused on three provinces in Zambia: Central, Copperbelt, and North-Western.

Activity Description

The USAID DISCOVER-Health Project engaged all staff working in both Project-supported sites and non-supported sites, initially working with more than 1,500 HCWs from 53 health facilities and district health offices between August and September 2021. It was critical to gain HCW support for the COVID-19 vaccine; as a trusted messenger they were the key group to signal to their communities that the vaccine was safe and important.

Through HCD-grounded focus group discussions with 1,621 HCWs, the Project identified critical factors inhibiting and motivating this behavior, including doubts that the vaccine was safe due to the short time it took for it to be developed, that it was the 'mark of the beast', that it could cause impotence in men and infertility in women, that it was a way of population control, and that recipients would die. Other barriers included long distances to vaccination centers (only a few health facilities were earmarked to provide vaccination), the brand variety and people's perception that one was better than others, and mis/disinformation about the vaccine on social media. Identified facilitators for vaccine uptake included positive experiences from peers, politicians, faith-based leaders and other influencers who received the vaccine, the interest and focus on those with an underlying medical condition on getting vaccinated, and short distances to vaccination centers.

Using these behavioral insights, the project supported the adaptation of the MOH's approach to HCW vaccination by:

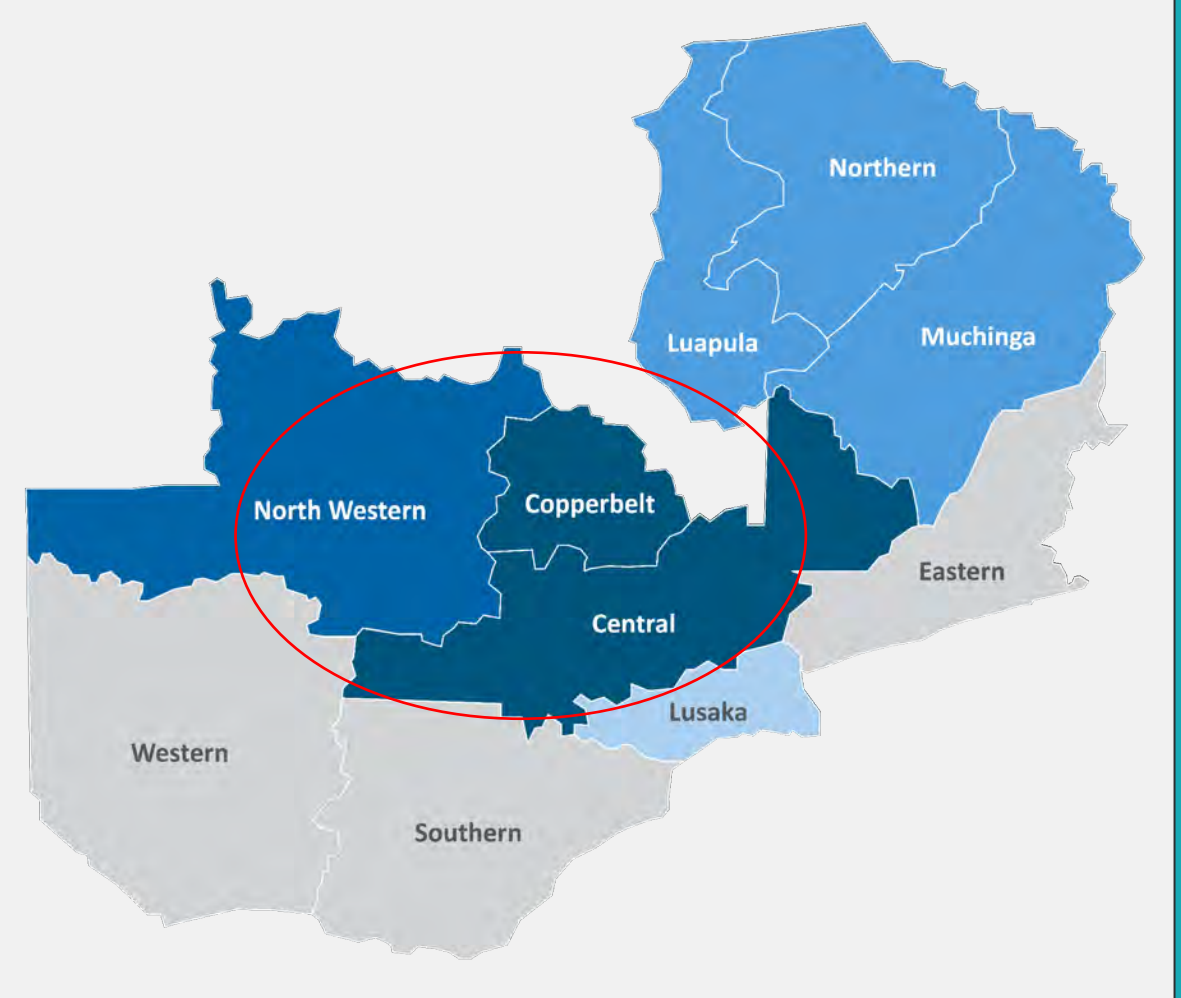
- Organizing vaccine information sessions for HCWs, which included targeted messaging based on the insights of the HCD workshops, addressing their concerns and providing guided, informed, and honest messaging on the vaccine, including its benefits.
- Pairing these vaccine information sessions for HCWs with vaccination services, which provided immediate access to vaccination for staff who opted in. This aimed to reduce the intention-to-action gap.
- Providing information on vaccination centers for those who needed more time to decide.
- Inspiring a call-to-action for HCWs participating in the information sessions to scale this orientation and new knowledge to all health workers in their communities.

To reach HCWs outside of the Project-supported health facilities, similar HCW-specific messages were disseminated on media channels, at both national and community level, using TV, radio, print, and billboard/poster advertising. Additionally, journalists and media influencers were counseled and trained on facts about COVID-19 and the vaccine to reinforce consistency in messaging and dispel misinformation.

This activity, focused on HCWs, was aligned with Zambia's national COVID-19 communications response, also supported by JSI's USAID DISCOVER-Health project. This broader population-based campaign worked through the Zambian Partners Against COVID-19, under the leadership of MOH and Zambia National Public Health Institute (ZNPHI). This allowed for lessons to be shared and consistency to be achieved across different SBC strategies and target audiences.



The team of CHWs and vaccine providers starts work moving door-to-door in Chingola.



Map depicting the intervention provinces

Activity Impact

By November 2021, 92% of the USAID DISCOVER-Health-supported HCWs had been fully vaccinated. The Project was now fully equipped to continue to support the delivery of essential and lifesaving frontline health services, and the staff could also now confidently walk the talk – that is, provide Zambians with informed, consistent information – in delivering COVID-19 vaccination services to the general public. As a result, HCWs were far more effective at not only sensitizing Zambians in their local communities, but also facilitating them to get vaccinated.

The Project opted to support the full vaccination cascade: from planning, operations, finance, service delivery and data management. The HCWs play a vital role at the community level engaging with the general public and local leadership. As a result of this SBC activity targeted at HCWs, they communicated accurate information about vaccination to the general public. As a result of the Project's engagement with the media at national and local levels, journalists and influencers spread more accurate and consistent information about COVID-19. 3.5 million TV viewers, and 7 million radio listeners were reached with accurate COVID-19 messages.

Developed and printed 30,000 COVID-19 vaccine fact sheets for the general public and 10,000 guide booklets for Community Mobilizers.

Deployed a multi-sectoral approach: engaged stakeholders and carried out community-based mobilizations in markets, bus stations and schools.

Engaged traditional, religious, and civic leaders to lead by example by getting vaccinated, helping combat myths, and sharing accurate information with their people.



CHW spreading the word about COVID-19 vaccines



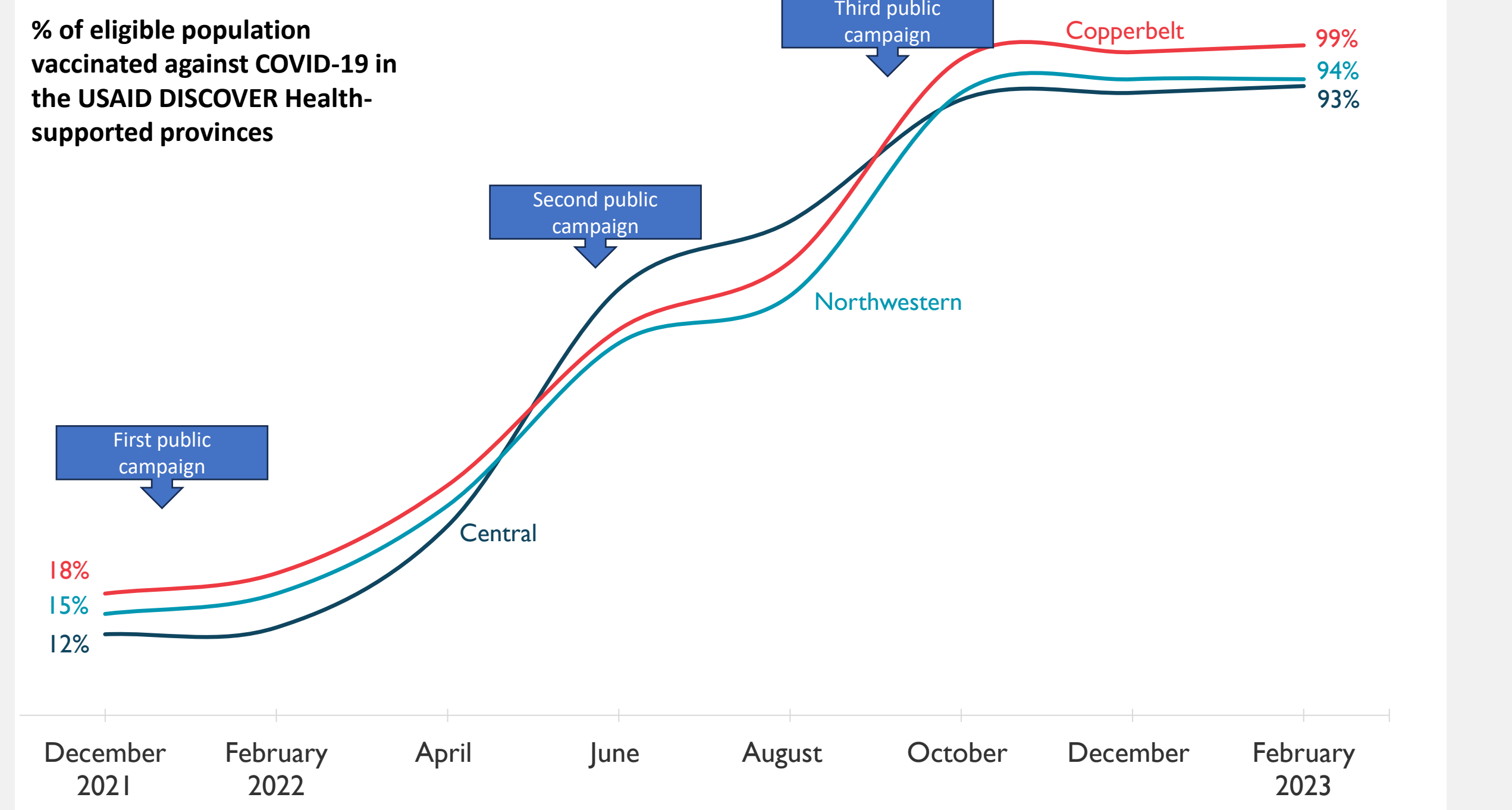
Young man receives his vaccine

A multi-sectoral approach that started first with HCWs

Evidence

The three-supported provinces, Central, Copperbelt, and North-Western, were among the first nationally to reach the 70% vaccination target for eligible populations, with Central Province crossing the finish line first in July 2022. The COVID-19 vaccination coverage rates for the eligible general population continued to climb in the three supported provinces, reaching between 93% and 99% by March 2023.

Converting HCWs from barriers to facilitators to the COVID-19 vaccine, meant that they become powerful ambassadors to sensitize the general public and help increase COVID-19 vaccination. Uniquely placed at the community level, their impact should not be underestimated; they played a crucial role in enabling Zambia to hit its 70% national vaccination target in October 2022 and for these three supported provinces in particular to achieve such outstanding coverage.



Facilitators

The Project's close partnership with the Government of Zambia and the Ministry of Health provided a pathway to gain the trust of HCWs. This allowed for the successful engagement of the HCWs nationwide.

The role of HCWs themselves was vital in this work. Engaging them as collaborators and 'humans', not recipients and 'workers' allowed a productive dynamic to form, meaning their voice was heard and their role respected. This facilitated trust of the HCWs in the activity. From initial focus group discussions to throughout vaccine rollout and national campaigns, HCWs took on a leadership role.

An informed and supportive media was also a powerful tool that further enhanced HCW buy-in and participation, and later on for the general public.

Collaboration with the broader national campaign around COVID-19 vaccination and involvement of all stakeholders allowed for consistent messaging, which proved crucial in countering mis/disinformation during the pandemic.



I am vaccinated! A school pupil celebrates receiving her COVID-19 vaccine at school.

Challenges

Materials were developed, for various target populations, to be distributed directly in the communities. It initially proved challenging to get these printed on location. Working closely with other partners allowed for quick reprinting. Booklets, guides and posters were translated into local languages and shared through community distribution channels, including HCWs vaccine manuals.

The initial model of COVID-19 vaccination was primarily delivered in selected health facilities, which proved an access barrier to HCWs working elsewhere. This was later addressed by increasing the number of facilities offering vaccination and providing vaccines through the outreach model, directly at community-level.

Shortages of HCWs, especially during the outbreak peaks, led to reduced manpower for service provision including vaccination. In response, out-of-service and newly graduated health workers were orientated and then engaged to provide services in health facilities, during these shortages.



Sensitization underway in Kamanda Market



A breastfeeding mother receives her COVID-19 vaccine certificate, after being vaccinated at a USAID DISCOVER-Health mobile site in Ndola

Lessons Learned

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

- Provide a safe environment** (space and time) for open and honest conversations with HCWs. This allowed for the development of better targeting of messages and their subsequent support.
- Empower healthcare workers.** As gatekeepers of society and their local communities, gaining their buy-in opened up the route to vaccinating the general public. Without this support it is highly unlikely that Zambia would have reached its 70% national vaccination target in October 2022.
- Deliver person-centered services locally.** Operating at the frontline HCW level and taking the information and vaccines to where people are found at school, church, markets, was key to a successful vaccination program.
- Local leadership, respectful engagement and harnessing of local solutions,** including locally-resonant messaging, cultural appropriateness, and availability of technical and financial resources were all important factors in making this SBC health systems strengthening approach a success.

