



ERADICATING POLIO

Working with community influencers
for catalyzing change



unite for children



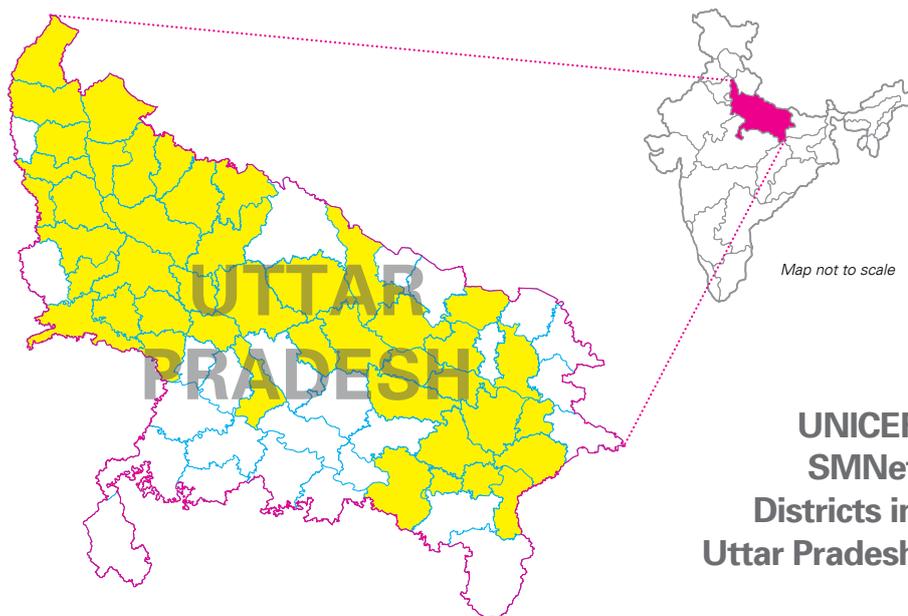
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ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

The Polio Eradication Programme in India witnessed a major roadblock in Uttar Pradesh. Due to myths and misconceptions, communities had a strong resistance towards the Oral Polio Vaccine. A range of strategies involving the medical fraternity were used to demystify the misconceptions. However, the results were not encouraging in the face of unprecedented resistance to one of the most ambitious public health programmes.

Along with its partners, UNICEF explored innovative strategies to engage with communities. One of the key initiatives by UNICEF in Uttar Pradesh was to sensitize and engage with local influencers. Individuals with some kind of authority in the community have the potential to be influencers (like religious leaders, Hajjis, medical practitioners, retired army persons, teachers, shopkeepers, local politicians, ward members and so on). An influencer may or may not have a mass following but s/he does wield significant influence over a section of the community.

Over a period of time, the involvement of 'influencers' on a large scale has made an appreciable effect on the Polio Eradication Programme. Trust building is important to deal with a resistant attitude. Often, it calls for a return to fundamentals like dialogue, consultation, creating a positive environment and provision of services. Attitude is largely shaped by people's immediate experiences. If intended services are not in place, or worse, if the dominant opinion persists, individual attitudes remain unchanged.

Involving influencers in the programme from the same community was not an easy task. Several processes were evolved to engage and motivate them. Ultimately, the results were highly encouraging. The involvement of influencers in the Polio Eradication Programme gave the required momentum to social mobilization at the community and individual levels. It also addressed community ownership and participation of the programme. The intervention to deal with resistance at the individual level had a very positive impact. The unique approach of influencers working as volunteers provided long term sustainability. Influencers considered this as an opportunity to serve their own community. The aim of involving influencers was two-fold: To motivate the community towards the Oral Polio Vaccine; and create a cadre of influencers with the potential to contribute to other developmental challenges including routine immunization, water and sanitation, hygiene and so on.

This document throws light on the involvement of influencers as a key component of UNICEF's Underserved Strategy (USS) for the Polio eradication programme in UP.

ACRONYMS

AMU	Aligarh Muslim University
BMC	Block Mobilization Coordinator
CDC	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
CMC	Community Mobilization Coordinator
DMC	District Mobilization Coordinator
GPEI	Global Polio Eradication Initiative
IEC	Information Education Communication
IPC	Inter-Personal Communication
NID	National Immunization Day
OPV	Oral Polio Vaccine
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
SMNet	Social Mobilization Network
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UP	Uttar Pradesh
USS	Underserved Strategy
WHO	World Health Organization
WPV	Wild Polio Virus



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INTRODUCTION

At the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) in 1988, the Wild Polio Virus¹ was endemic in as many as 125 countries, affecting an estimated 350,000 globally². At that time, polio paralyzed more than 1000 children across the world every day. The coordinated efforts of National Governments, World Health Organization (WHO), Rotary International, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) had a major impact on the largest public health initiative in the world. By 2012, GPEI brought down the number of cases



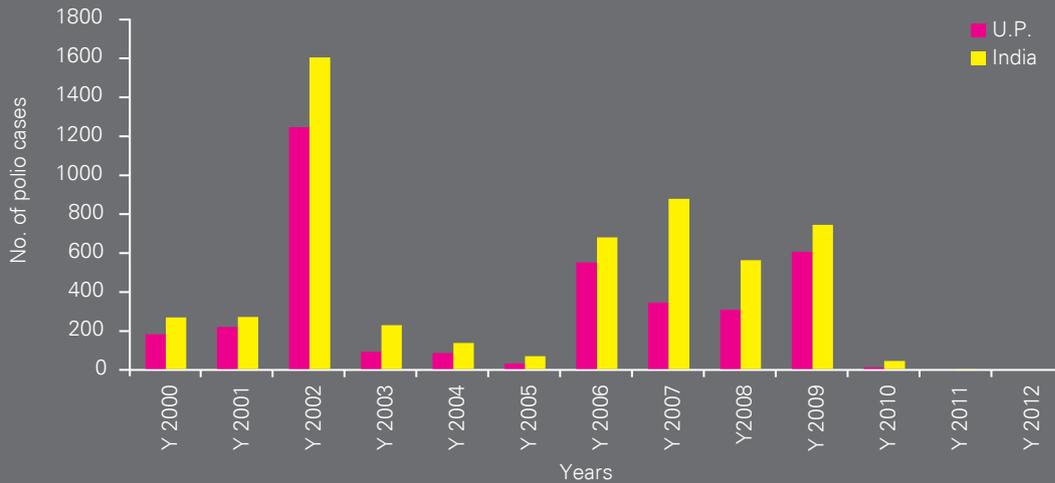
to 650, with just three countries in the endemic category – Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria³.

Since the launch of GPEI, 2.5 billion children have been immunized against polio with the cooperation of more than 200 countries and 20 million volunteers, backed by an international investment of more than US\$ 8 billion.

India's last polio case was reported in West Bengal on 13 January 2011. The polio survivor, an 18-month-old girl named Rukhsar from

1 Wild Polio Virus (WPV) - WPV is the naturally occurring causative agent of poliomyelitis and is present in three forms WPV1, WPV 2, WPV 3.
2 Communication Handbook for Polio Eradication and Routine EPI - UNICEF, WHO and Polio Partners, 2001

3 Polio Eradication Fact-file, Volume 1, March 2012, UNICEF

Figure 1: Wild polio cases in UP and India

Data source: AFP Surveillance Bulletin – India, Report for week 45, ending 10 November 2012

Howrah district, was infected with type-1 poliovirus. Under the Pulse Polio Immunization programme, launched in 1995, about 172 million children were immunized on each National Immunization Day (NID) every year. Despite these efforts, India's share in the total number of polio cases worldwide remained quite high even till 2009. In that year, India registered 741 cases of the 1,604 cases worldwide⁴. The reported cases were mostly from two states in India, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. The Figure 1 depicts that over the last 10 years, the majority of polio cases were being reported from the state of UP. From this it can be inferred that an improvement in the status of UP will have a positive impact on the overall scenario of India.

4 From 200,000 to Zero, The journey to a polio-free India, UNICEF, 2012.

The majority of polio cases in UP were largely reported from 13 western districts. Notably, these areas had a higher proportion of minority population compared to other districts of the state. The initial challenge was to convince these communities to take polio vaccine. The situation became all the more challenging due to myths and misconceptions, and lack of trust in and proper knowledge about the Polio Eradication Programme.

Initiatives were introduced by various agencies to tackle specific obstacles to fortify the polio eradication programme. In 2001, UNICEF established the Social Mobilization Network (SMNet) in UP to mobilize the community for the Polio Eradication Programme.

As part of the strategy, UNICEF also engaged with religious leaders to demystify misconceptions and increase acceptance of the Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV).

SMNet is a group of enthusiastic social mobilizers and health communicators trained by UNICEF to support the social mobilization efforts. Started in 2001 in UP, the network evolved as the strength of the programme; providing the much-needed vital support to the Polio Eradication Programme.

SMNet has a three tier structure. At the community level, the Community Mobilization Coordinator (CMC) identified from the community, works at the grass root level.

CMCs work in close coordination with and under the supervision of the Block Mobilization Coordinator (BMC).

At the district level, District Mobilization Coordinators (DMCs) provide support and provide overall guidance to the BMCs and CMCs.

The inroads made by SMNet and religious leaders accelerated the social mobilization efforts. Even so, further efforts were required at the community and household levels to reach

out to resistant families and motivate them.

To provide further impetus, UNICEF introduced the concept of 'influencers'. These were important individuals from the community perceived as allies for the cause. There was also a need to create a cadre of well-informed motivated volunteers from the community to make the programme sustainable. The other key reasons for involving influencers from the community in the Polio Eradication Programme were:

- There was a high level of trust deficit in the community regarding OPV and the Polio Eradication Programme. Many believed the polio drive was a family planning programme to bring down the population of the minority community. One of the reasons behind this misconception was that the family planning programme was being promoted by the same health workers.
- It was challenging for the CMCs to cover the large size of the population in 200-300 households allocated to them. During the polio rounds, the CMCs are responsible for



CMC interacting with women in Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, India

The features of an influencer:

- Wield considerable social, economic and political influence
- Source of credible information in the community
- Ability to motivate people to work against resistance towards OPV
- Sanction certain behaviors or actions
- Allies in dispelling myths/rumours and reducing resistance
- Willing to act on their own
- Enhance community ownership and participation

coordinating booth activities and mobilizing communities. Influential people were needed to support their social mobilization efforts.

- Social pressure plays an important role. Influential people from the same community are considered to be a better medium to educate their own communities. People of importance could play a critical role by reinforcing messages and creating an enabling environment for the Polio Eradication Programme.

UNICEF decided to involve influential people from the community in polio eradication efforts. As a CMC from Aligarh aptly summarized: *"Influencers are among the highly respected people of the community. They are seen as knowledgeable and trust worthy individuals. Community members at times may not listen to their peers, the appeals from religious leaders may not reach them but an influential person from within the community cannot be easily ignored."*

Influential leaders fall into different categories, assuming different responsibilities that depend on the target group and activities. Though the

community influencer may not have a defined set of roles, their work is classified into two categories, prior to and during the vaccination drive.

Prior to Polio Vaccination drive the community influencers:

Participate in community meetings to facilitate the process of local communication planning; support local mobilizers during IPC and group meetings to deliver essential messages and influence attitudes; and provide logistical support during meetings to ensure effective community participation. Announcements and delivery of messages are also made by Imams (local religious community influencer) from mosques during "Khuthba⁵". The local community influencers also: take initiatives to enroll more children at booths; participate in interface meetings and plan for operations at local, block and district level; support the mobilization teams by endorsing local IEC materials.

During the Vaccination Drive the community influencers:

Support the local vaccination teams during their visit to houses in high risk areas; make personal visits to resistant households to convince the families; provide meeting space for vaccination teams when required.

Other influencers, such as occupational and caste based leaders, also play an active role to motivate resistant families. The role of these leaders may be restricted to information sharing and motivating their followers.

5 Khuthba is a sermon usually initiated by the maulvis and maulanas.

two

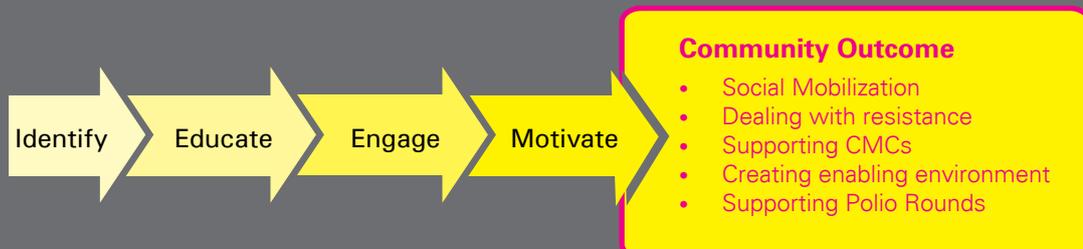
GET THE INFLUENCER TO INFLUENCE HEALTH DECISIONS



To evolve a network of highly motivated volunteers, UNICEF developed a sustainable strategy to provide momentum to social mobilization efforts. The key steps to engage influencers are presented in Figure 2:

The first important step was to identify the 'right individual'. UNICEF involved the SMNet functionaries to map and identify influential people who could work as allies. Once the potential influencers were identified, efforts were made to motivate them to participate in the Polio Eradication Programme.

Figure 2: Influential People from the community





Influencers during an interaction with UNICEF officials in Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, India

It was important to educate them on details of the Polio Eradication Programme and address concerns and queries adequately. A series of orientation programmes were conducted to educate them about OPV and the Polio Eradication Programme. UNICEF also focused on providing them enough opportunities to participate in the programme. Due emphasis was given to develop a sense of ownership among the influencers. This was meant to enable a change in community behavior to be viewed as a personal accomplishment.

The influencers are not a homogenous group and their level of understanding varies considerably. After careful planning, the following steps were undertaken during the initial process.

1. Identifying potential

Identifying the right individuals as influencers was the first step towards forming a cadre of dependable individuals. The CMCs knew of the influential persons in the community. The grassroots leaders, selected on the basis of their influence, were sensitized to join the efforts. An *Imam* of the local mosque, the established medical practitioner of the locality, the ward member or any other elected official, the options were numerous. Sometimes influencers were chosen to focus on particular resistant families. *Mr. Ehsan Ali, a grocery shop owner in Meerut was approached by a CMC in his area. He has been an active influencer for the past 7-8 years. During the initial days he tried to speak to family members but they would not listen. The family members would say that their family's health was none of his business. He told them that the polio programme was not just for them but for the betterment of the entire community.*

He persuaded them and involved other people to motivate them. Ehsan says, "The degree of my persuasion and my seriousness perhaps made an impact and they got their children immunized with OPV".

In 2005, pilgrims applying for the Hajj⁶ were asked to submit their polio immunization certificate. The requirement of polio immunization certificate came from Government of Saudi Arabia. It was a move to ensure that polio virus does not enter Saudi Arabia (polio free country). Hajj is considered as manifestation of Islamic faith and unity. This regulatory move by the Government of Saudi Arabia making it mandatory for Hajj travellers to have polio immunization certificate was considered as an endorsement of absence of any kind of forbidden material being used to prepare the polio vaccine which can hurt religious sentiments. The partners in Polio Eradication Programme saw this as an opportunity.

Though there were no fixed guidelines to select an influencer but UNICEF's efforts were to engage and educate key people and convince them to play a crucial role. CMCs and BMCs constantly seek opportunities to include influential people and create a cadre of volunteers.

6 The Hajj is the largest regularly occurring pilgrimage in the world, and one of the five pillars of Islam, a religious duty that must be carried out by every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so at least once in his or her lifetime. The Hajj is a demonstration of the solidarity of the Muslim people, and their submission to God.

Types of Influencers

Various individuals with some kind of authority in the community have the potential to be an influencer like religious leaders, Hajjis, medical practitioners, retired army persons, teachers, shopkeepers, local politicians, ward members and so on. With the support of partners, the SMNet identified and classified influencers:

Religious leader as influencers – Religious leaders **across all religions** are influential and well respected and have mass reach in their **respective communities**. It was therefore important to involve them as influencers to motivate the community.

Occupational leaders as influencers – In rural areas, large contractors and suppliers are seen as a source of earning and have an important position in their community. In western UP, among the main sources of livelihood, meat trade, bangle industry, and brass industries are prominent. Contractors and suppliers who manage these industries are important stake

2. Educating influencers and sharing their responsibility

The next step was to involve and educate the potential influencers. In many cases, the influencers were themselves resistant to OPV and not willing to participate. The situation gradually improved with continuous dialogue and endorsements by national level religious institutions and leaders. Efforts were made to provide complete information, and slowly most of them agreed to work as influencers.

holders in influencing attitudes and behaviours of the communities/individuals involved in these industries. Once these occupational leaders are involved, it becomes easy to convey messages to people working under them.

Caste Based Influencers - In India, the age-old caste system of social stratification has played a huge historical role in influencing community behaviour. Although primarily associated with Hinduism, caste systems have also been observed among other religions. Each caste has caste leaders. Certain castes particularly resistant to vaccination were approached by their caste leaders.

Family Based Influencers – A large number of families could still not be persuaded to accept the polio vaccine. These families could be approached and influenced by someone the family considered a well wisher. A person from the family itself or an outsider close to the family was involved for motivation.

Local Influencers – Every community has a set of people who speak well and are respected for their

views, like shop owners, teachers, doctors, Hajjis or ward members. Their good communication skills enhance their social acceptance and make them the 'go-to persons' in times of need. The influence of such people was harnessed to disseminate positive messages.

Mr. Mohammed Rashid is a shopkeeper with a small electronic shop in Aligarh. He has been associated with the Polio Eradication Programme as an influencer for the past three-four years.

"My father is an Imam, so the community respects our family. The CMC in our area is very active. She explained the polio programme and OPV and asked for my support. Initially, I was hesitant but my father also participated in the polio programme when he was alive. I followed my father's footsteps and got involved in the programme. I feel great to be a part of it as I am able to do something for the children of our community. Not only that, I have gained a great amount of knowledge about polio, health and hygiene. Due to my regular interaction with the community, people quite often come to me for consultation."

The BMCs and CMCs regularly oriented the influencers about their role. The influencers were also given a booklet of 'frequently asked questions'. This was part of the process of preparing them to face the community and answer their questions satisfactorily. They were also informed about details of the polio rounds, their aspect of support and other health aspects like hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, etc.

Various opportunities were used to reinforce knowledge. The efforts are aptly summarized from the experience shared by an influencer, Dr Dilshad Saifi, Publisher, India ki Raftar, Shakoor Nagar, Meerut - *"Until about five years*

ago, the situation of the polio programme in our area was absolutely dismal. Despite the crippling effects of the disease, people chose not to take OPV. They chose to believe the rumors and myths. I sometimes used to go around with the vaccination team and BMCs to convince resistant families. I remember a man threatened to break open the skull of anyone who spoke even a word about polio. I was taken aback by the intensity of his argument. He knew me well and I spoke to him patiently. Eventually, he agreed. For any influencer, the satisfaction of convincing and changing a person's opinion keeps him or her committed to the cause".



An Influencer supporting SMNet Volunteer during booth day in Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh, India

3. Engaging them effectively

Influencers are volunteers who feel the need to participate because of their involvement with the community and the satisfaction of being heard. However, their enthusiasm and motivation can drop rapidly. It is therefore important to continuously engage with them. UNICEF accomplished this by using innovative activities and initiating continuous dialogue with the influencers.

Effective engagement of influencers brings about positive results and a sense of ownership. Mr. Yameen Khan, ex-ward councilor, Jamalpur, Aligarh, believes that change cannot be brought about by one person or activity alone. People need to join hands and strive hard for change. According to Mr. Khan, this is what UNICEF attempted and achieved. It brought

multiple stakeholders together and engaged in numerous activities for the single purpose of eradicating polio.

Mr. Khan was a councilor from 2003 to 2006. He wields considerable influence and is a known face in his ward. He vividly remembers the time when Aligarh used to be a hotbed of resistance. He recalls women scaring away the vaccinators with stones.

When SMNet approached him to support the Polio Eradication Programme, he was more than willing to join the cause. He saw lack of education as the biggest reason why people believed that OPV led to infertility and that the polio programme was a government plan for

population control. He has attended several influencers meetings and proudly claims to have converted countless resistant families. He went door to door, spoke

"I remember a woman telling me that if I am advocating the OPV cause, I should take responsibility if anything happened to her child. I gladly did so. She came around when she saw her child absolutely healthy after the dose and thanked me for putting good sense into her".



District level influencer appreciation event in Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh, India

about polio at public meetings and tried to convince as many people as possible through personal interactions.

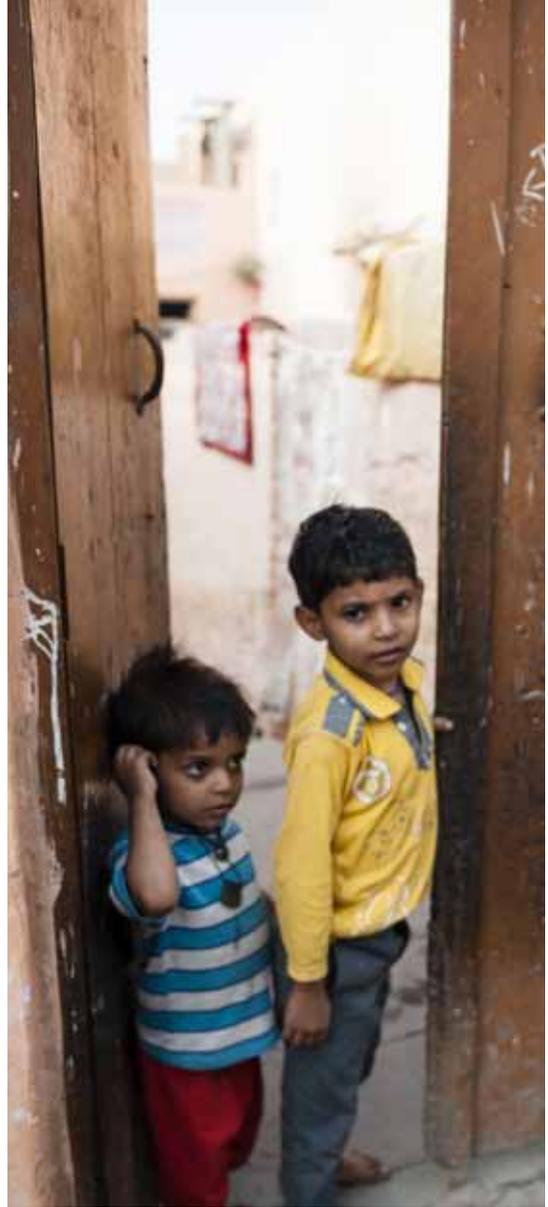
The engagement level of influencers varies, depending on the type of resistance. Influencers like Imams, Maulvis, local leaders and other highly influential people were engaged in local level advocacy. They addressed public functions to raise general awareness and create a supportive environment. Other influencers were involved in house-to-house activities with CMCs, vaccinators and supervisors. They accompany CMCs during regular home visits to reinforce messages. They are also present to encourage and motivate families to bring their children and deal with resistance, if any, on the booth day itself.

4. Motivating influencers

To motivate influencers and keep them involved in the polio programme, it was necessary to ensure that their achievements are duly recognized. District and block level felicitation meetings are regularly held to award distinguished influencers. Many influencers were invited to district task force and other meetings, to make them feel integral to the programme. Many influencers were asked to inaugurate and address polio rallies and booth day activities, giving them a proud moment to remember. They were also involved in community level planning for polio rounds, to develop a sense of ownership in them.

three

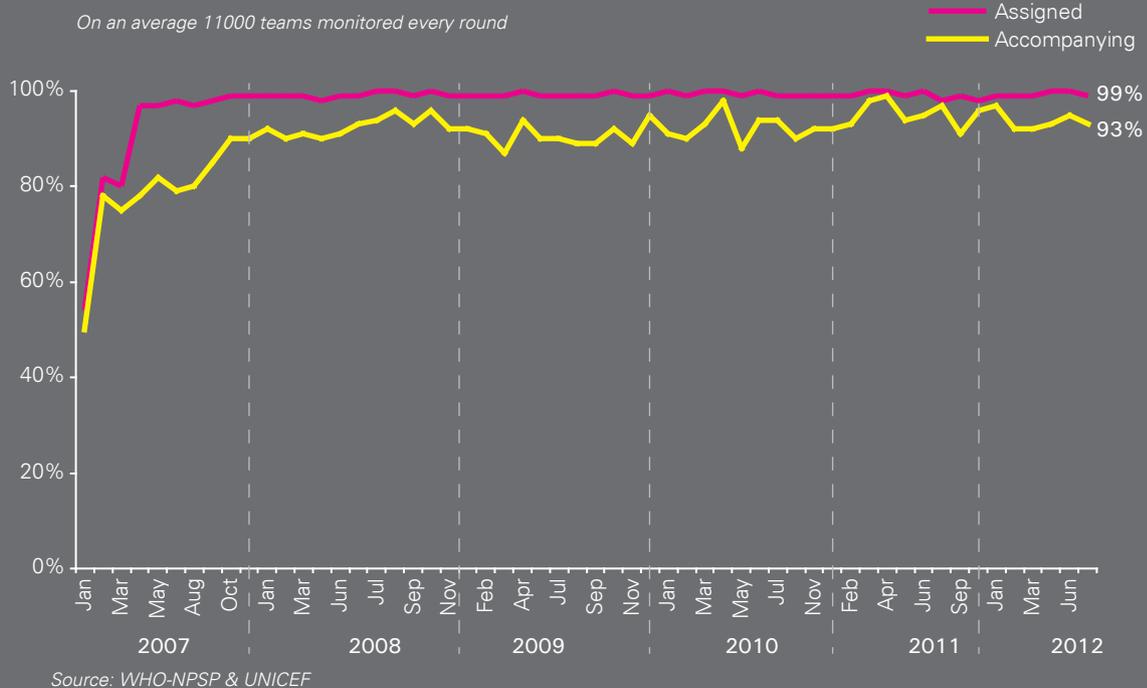
THE INDISPENSABLE CONTRIBUTION OF INFLUENCERS TO THE POLIO ERADICATION PROGRAM



Over the years, approximately **31,000 influencers** are working voluntarily with the vaccinating teams. The influencers have provided immense support to the vaccination teams. Figure 3 shows their level of commitment. In the initial years, participation of influencers was low but later, it has always been above 90 per cent.

Resistance towards OPV was a major road block in the Polio Eradication Programme in Uttar Pradesh. Influencers have been effective in tackling this challenge and reaching out to the most resistant families. There are many encouraging stories regarding the role played

by influencers. Maulana Anwar, Madrassa In-charge, Noor UI Islam Madrassa, Shakoor Nagar, Meerut says, *“When UNICEF started its polio eradication activities in my area, I used to teach at the Madrassa. I used to believe in the rumors surrounding OPV and was against the vaccine. The BMC in my area spoke to me on numerous occasions, told me about the effects of the disease but I was not convinced. It was when I read the appeals from AMU and other leaders that I was convinced. Now I go around with the CMC and vaccination teams and make sure people who refused to vaccinate their children earlier are now not resistant to vaccinate their children. My views changed after getting proper information, so I did not find it difficult to convince the resistant families.”*

Figure 3: Percentage of vaccination team being accompanied by Influencer

Another example worth highlighting is that of Dr. Khaleel, a local medical practitioner from Meerut, who took the responsibility of convincing families in his neighborhood. The BMC had requested him to be a part of the Polio Eradication Programme. He started agreeing to host the booth activities in his chamber. He then started distributing toys and sweets to every child who came to get immunized. He also arranged publicity music events like Qawalli programmes before the booth day, so he could spread the word in the neighborhood.

Dr. Khaleel's dedicated work over the years has earned him a lot of praise. He has been recognized and appreciated at the district level for motivating and influencing the maximum number of beneficiaries of the Polio Eradication Programme. He has been regularly attending the district task force meetings and influencer meetings over these years. According to him, all this has opened up a whole new world for him.

"Now that polio is on the verge of the end, I want people to focus more on healthy practices and take part with equal enthusiasm in Routine Immunization activities."

The results of engaging with influencers were highly favorable and provided them the opportunity to contribute much more than what was originally envisioned. Though influencers were initially only requested to raise awareness, they went much beyond that. Many influencers voluntarily worked with the CMC in managing booth activity, making house visits and visiting resistant families. Some influencers also started assisting in arranging logistics. There are several examples of how influencers innovated to sensitize the community and disseminate complete and correct information.

For the influencers, the polio programme reinforced their social standing and provided the personal satisfaction of being heard. Performing an altruistic role in the society made them feel better about themselves.

Given the range of stakeholders and strategies that were and are being used in UP to overcome resistance among the families, it is difficult to quantify the results achieved by influencers. The coordinated efforts of influencers along with Government officials, religious leaders, CMCs, UNICEF and other partners have contributed to India achieving the milestone in 2012.

One example of coordinated effort is the story of Tabassum Parveen, a housewife from Jamalpur, Aligarh. Parveen's house was one of the many resistant families, where Khalida Shervani works as a CMC. The first time Shervani went to meet Parveen, she was asked to leave because of the impotency rumors surrounding OPV. Parveen's mother-in-law was



Influencer accompanying the CMC and interacting with the community in Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, India



Anganwadi worker with a group of children on booth day in Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh, India

against her grandchildren being immunized. Shervani took help of a local influencer and visited Parveen's house after a few days. She also started interacting with Parveen informally. In the initial days, she refrained from talking about polio. After repeated efforts by the influencer and Shervani and showing the AMU's endorsement, Parveen's mother-in-law understood the importance of the vaccine. One day, Shervani asked Parveen to join her in her daily visits to families in her

area. Parveen enjoyed meeting new people and talking about critical health behavior and narrated her own story to families. These real life examples show the strength of joint efforts and how it contributed to even the slightest change in community behavior. Quantitative data on critical processes involved during the polio rounds suggest that the influencers were always there to give support, particularly in areas where CMCs were active.

four

WAY FORWARD



The influencers are volunteers forming an additional cadre of motivators. The strategy of involving them is considered sustainable. Periodic meetings and interactions with the influencers are sure to keep up the momentum.

The support of influencers works at different levels of state, district and community. Table 1 shows the range of influencers voluntarily supporting to address different groups of people. This huge number of volunteers can be used for other health/development issues in the future.

Table 1: Type of influencers	
	(No.)
Religious Leader	2799
Local Medical Practitioner	4275
PRI/ Health workers/ Other	4426
Government / Family Based	
Occupational Leader	19854

The involvement of influencers in the polio programme and the role they played in overcoming resistance has important lessons. There are many other health issues that still plague the nation and influencers can play a crucial role in addressing them. The influencers perceive the benefits of engaging themselves with social issues and would be more than willing to join hands.



World Health
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