

Achieving Polio Eradication in Nigeria's States – the Role of Nigeria Governors' Forum (NGF)

Previous efforts to wage a sustained and concerted fight against the scourge of Polio failed to achieve the desired results. Studies by experts revealed that only Nigerian Children were still exposed to all three types of Poliovirus that could cause life-long paralysis and more Nigerian children were paralysed from Polio than in any other country in the world. In the Northern parts of the country especially, there was widespread suspicion of the polio vaccines and efforts to reassure the people proved largely abortive.

The NGF recognized that this state of affairs was indicative of a failing primary health care system and that the achievement of Polio eradication would require strong leadership from the State and Local Government Area (LGA) administrations as well as strategic guidance from the State Health officials.

In February 2009, Bill Gates of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) enlisted the support and cooperation of the NGF to wage a combined war against Polio culminating in a set of resolutions reached on 2nd February, 2009 and known as the **Abuja Commitments to Polio Eradication in Nigeria**. The Governors under the aegis of the NGF committed themselves to:

1. Providing active leadership of Polio eradication activities (including routine immunization) and primary health care in general, in the State and directing LGA Chairmen to ensure that all children under 5 years are reached and vaccinated during any polio eradication activity in the State;
2. Improving the operational quality at the LGA in our States by chairing quarterly meetings with all the LGA Chairmen to closely review the planning, implementation and results of polio eradication activities, routine immunization/primary healthcare and identifying remedies for poor-performing LGAs;
3. Allocating additional financial and human resources to strengthen Primary Health Care so that it can sustain routine immunization services and improve implementation of campaigns (Immunisation Plus Days) in the State;
4. Reporting back to the President through NEC on a quarterly basis on the status of Polio eradication efforts including routine immunization, in the State;
5. Improving Primary Health care as a more holistic plan to addressing the issue of immunization through community health insurance schemes.

Following the commitments reached, the NGF working with the leadership and officials of the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) designed a set of indicators that would help in monitoring and assessing the level of implementation and performance of the commitments at the State and Local Government levels. The indicators included:

1. Personal involvement of the State Governor in public events in support of the War against Polio. eg Meeting with key stakeholders, flag-off ceremonies.
2. At least one meeting between the Governor (or his representative) with LGA Chairmen to discuss priority actions to Polio Eradication Initiative (PEI)/Routine Immunisation (RI) each quarter.
3. At least one meeting between the Governor (or his representative) with traditional leaders to review their involvement with PEI/RI each quarter.
4. At least one meeting of State Task Force or similar high level oversight committee established by the Governor to oversee PEI/RI activities each quarter.

To further underscore the resolve of the governors to stamp out Polio from the country, the NGF set aside August 8, 2009 as a day to mark and re-invigorate the fight against Polio in Nigeria. The NGF recognized that this would serve to reinforce the commitment of the governors as well as re-emphasise the political will to fight Polio.

The NGF activities towards this effort included:

- a. Waging sensitization campaigns and activities geared towards getting the full cooperation of the people in the local communities, whose resistance to the polio vaccines was well known.
- b. Direct engagement of representatives from the ward level, religious and traditional leaders as well as the civil society.
- c. Involving private advertising/public relations firms to implement awareness campaigns with particular heed paid to the peculiar customs and traditions of various target communities.
- d. Ensuring that Polio vaccines as well as other regular vaccines were regularly available in most primary and secondary health facilities in the States.
- e. The result of this concerted and sustained fight against Polio was that between January and October, 2010, there were only 8 reported cases of Polio in 5 States, an unprecedented 98% decline compared to the same period in 2009, where there were 382 cases.

As a mark of his appreciation at the remarkable ground covered in the Polio eradication efforts, Bill Gates visited Nigeria in July 2010 to meet with the 36 Governors to on the one hand express gratitude to the NGF for the work done so far and also chart a roadmap for the work that still needed to be done to ensure the complete eradication of the scourge.

However, 1st and 2nd Quarter Reports for 2011 show that the gains of the previous year have been eroded because of the re-surfacing of polio cases in some parts of the country.

To reinforce the commitment of the 36 governors to the complete eradication of polio, in Nigeria, the new Chairman of the Forum upon assumption of office identified 'polio' as one of his priorities. Not only has the war on polio become a regular subject of discussion at NGF meetings, the Forum also set aside a day in every quarter within which all the States would collectively demonstrate their resolve to stamp out polio from the country. This would be done through mass mobilizations and campaigns to create awareness.

The dates agreed by the Governors for the quarterly activities are:

- i. 1st Quarter – Saturday, 13th August, 2011
- ii. 2nd Quarter – Saturday, 12th November, 2011
- iii. 3rd Quarter – Saturday, 11th January, 2012
- iv. 4th Quarter – Saturday, 12th May, 2012

The 1st quarter campaign has since been held and States rose to the occasion in demonstrating their determination to fight polio. Some of the activities during the first quarter event were:

- Media broadcast by the State Governors
- Visits to traditional rulers in recognition of their roles as very significant stakeholders
- Demonstration of Immunisation – Governors led by example by immunizing a number of children

The NGF role in the health sector in Nigeria was openly acclaimed in December 2010 at a Forum by Dr. Mohammed Pate, the then Executive Director of National Primary Healthcare Development Agency and now Minister of State for Health.

ABUJA COMMITMENTS TO POLIO ERADICATION IN NIGERIA

- A communiqué following the meeting of governors with Mr. Bill Gates
- 02 February 2009

We, the Executive Governors of the thirty-six (36) States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, meeting in Abuja, with Mr. Bill Gates, on 2 February, 2009 at a special session on health convened under the leadership of His Excellency, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Bearing in mind our constitutional responsibilities and our strong desire to have a healthy population, and our duty to protect our children from all childhood diseases, including polio and other vaccine preventable diseases, and an international commitment to a world-free of polio

Noting with concern that in the world today, only Nigerian children are being exposed to all three types of Poliovirus that can cause life-long paralysis, and more Nigerian children are paralyzed from Polio than in any other country in the world

Acknowledging that the eradication of polio is, therefore, an urgent health priority for our States, and our Nation, and the successful completion of Polio eradication in Nigeria will enhance the Government's capacity and support for delivering other vital health services,

Recognizing that,

- There must be universal coverage for all Nigerians,
- Polio in itself is symptomatic of a failing primary health care system,
- That a viable Primary Health Care system is the sustainable platform for Routine Immunization in Nigeria,
- 90% of all children will have to be reached and vaccinated to stop the sustained transmission of Polio,
- completion of Polio eradication will require strong leadership from the State and LGA administrations, and strategic guidance from the State Health officials,
- Oral Polio Vaccines used in Nigeria are safe and effective, and similar to those used in countries that have eradicated polio,
- valuable technical and financial support from WHO, UNICEF, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Rotary International and other development partners will assist in the strengthening eradication activities and routine immunization in the States,

The Initiative by Niger State Government to legislate against polio immunization should be shared with other states for consideration.

Noting that under our (Governors) leadership we can secure the historic achievement of a polio-free Nigeria, expedite the delivery of a polio-free Africa, and protect the lives of millions of children for all future generations,

We COMMIT OURSELVES to:

1. Providing active leadership of Polio eradication activities (including routine immunization) and primary health care, in general, in the State and directing LGA Chairmen to ensure that all children under 5 years are reached and vaccinated during any polio eradication activity in the State;
2. Improving the operational quality at the LGA level in our States by Chairing quarterly meetings with all the LGA Chairmen to closely review the planning, implementation, and results of polio eradication activities, routine immunization/primary health care and identify remedies for poor-performing LGAs;

3. Allocating additional financial and human resources to strengthen Primary Health Care so that it can sustain routine immunization services and improve implementation of campaigns (Immunization Plus Days) in the State;
4. Reporting back to H.E. the President through NEC on a quarterly basis on the status of polio eradication efforts, including routine immunization, in the State.
5. Improving Primary Health Care as a more holistic plan to addressing the issue of immunization through community health insurance schemes.

Signed at Abuja, Nigeria on 2nd February in the Year 2009.



DR. BUKOLA SARAKI

CHAIRMAN, GOVERNORS FORUM &
EXECUTIVE GOVERNOR OF KWARA STATE



PROF. BABATUNDE OSOTIMEHIN
HON. MINISTER FOR HEALTH