

Challenges in Polio Campaigns

Introduction

Pakistan, one of the last three polio-endemic countries, vaccinated nearly 40 million children in 2023 through 285,000 frontline workers (FLWs), reducing cases to 6 from 147 in 2019. Challenges include high population density, climate conditions and fecal-oral transmission. The Pakistan Polio Eradication Initiative (PEI) aims for a polio-free Pakistan via extensive campaigns, behavioral change, awareness, and case monitoring. This policy brief discusses obstacles of polio campaigns and potential solutions.

Methodology

17 in-depth interviews were conducted with National Emergency Operations Center (NEOC), provincial (PEOC) officials along with partner organizations (UNICEF, WHO, Government) at the provincial, district, tehsil, and union council level. Interviews covered researchers, technical staff, field staff, front line polio workers and policy makers of polio eradication program across Pakistan over 3 months in 2022.

Key Findings

Microplanning: Technology Divides and Errors

Older polio workers struggle with updating high-quality micro maps due to capacity, time and education constraints resulting in missed households. After micro plans are finalized, the district polio in charge must review all received union council level micro plans and validate 20% via field visits. However, large districts like Rawalpindi with over 190+ union councils, it's impractical for the District Incharge to conduct diligent verification.

Team composition: Context Matters

Pakistan's multicultural and multiethnic society necessitates hiring competent FLWs while allowing for gender, ethnic and tribal representation. FGDs with community parents/caregivers highlights that "insiders" are better trusted, and in many Pashtun communities only female FLWs are allowed if men of the household are away. Our data shows that some chronic refusals agreed to vaccinate their children when approached by a vaccinator from their own ethnicity.

Changes in teams: Consistency and Rapport

Frequent team changes limits trust and rapport building in the community especially after they develop rapport with the team (even if they are from a different ethnicity - although this is not as common. People refuse to get their children vaccinated by newcomers.

Awareness Campaigns: Engage Communities

The use of Urdu and medical jargon in the IEC material is a major roadblock polio campaign. Audio and video messages in mainstream media are often produced in Urdu vs the local languages, – which fails to have an impact where needed.

Inflexible Campaigns: Can Timings be Flexible?

Despite logistical challenges, polio experts and program team members agree that fixed campaign timings are a major annoyance for communities and advocate for flexible vaccine delivery timings. Similarly, most FLWs report that they must follow

Key Points

- Microplanning is a tedious exercise, often beyond the capacity of those responsible for it.
- It is crucial that FLWs are selected keeping the local contexts (gender, ethnicity, language, etc.) in mind, and that frequent changes in teams are avoided.
- FLWs complain about their workload and insufficient compensation and appreciation for their efforts.

the micro-plan's sequence and direction, even when they believe alterations would be more time efficient, leading to additional work.

Challenges to FLWs: Carrot and Stick

Polio workers often feel overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated, with feedback focusing more on missed households rather than acknowledging the houses they converted from chronic refusals.

Monitoring; Balancing Appreciation with Quality Compliance

Post campaign monitoring (PCM) using Lot Quality Assurance Sampling (LQAS) via independent third-party firm, is disliked by district teams. They find the pass/fail concept harsh and view LQAS as incomplete and conducted by inadequate personnel. The monitoring system is seen as mainly focusing to find deficiencies rather than appreciating the hard work.

Recommendations

1. **Technology Trainings and Refreshers** – equipping FLWs with basic technology and time management can allay their concerns and enhance microplanning accuracy. Similarly, support from IT professionals can provide teams with additional back-up assurance.
2. **District Level Validation** – may benefit from re-distributing additional staff to large and mid-size districts with defined criteria i.e. UC, population base etc. with ratio of supervisor per UC etc.
3. **Local Contexts and Appreciation** – a grading system of FLWs would allow flexible timings and approaches, with additional checks by supervisors/community committees. Engaging communities in polio campaigns, IEC materials can enhance ownership, engagement, and demand creation for a polio free province and Pakistan. Particular attention should be paid to the insider construct and language familiarity in FLWs.

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