

Breakthrough **ACTION**-Nigeria



Transformative Stories of Religious and Traditional Leaders Inspiring Healthy Communities



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Walking the Talk as a Social Behavior Change Role Model

Photo caption: Mallam Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa, Chief Imam of Zango Central Mosque and SBC-ACG member Bwari LGA.

This is a story of positive change in Bwari Local Government Area (LGA) in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, as told by Mallam Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa. As in many other areas of Nigeria, most women in Bwari gave birth at home with the help of traditional birth attendants, and very few residents slept under insecticide-treated nets or sought health care services at the health facility. This began to change after Mallam Nasarawa joined the Social Behavior Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG) in 2018, received training from Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria, and spoke out in favor of modern health practices.

Mallam Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa is the chief Imam of Zango Central Mosque and a member of the SBC-ACG in Bwari LGA of FCT. Before joining the SBC-ACG, very few people in Bwari, including Mallam Nasarawa, had adopted priority health practices recommended by the government.



"In the past, our wives were giving birth at home with the help of a traditional birth attendant. We didn't know about skin-to-skin care. We used to apply salt to treat the umbilical cord, and we used to think sleeping under treated mosquito nets or visiting the health facility was a luxury."

- Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa, Chief Imam of Zango Central Mosque and SBC-ACG member Bwari LGA.

As an SBC-ACG member, Mallam received training and mentoring from Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria and has been speaking out in the mosque and other community gatherings about antenatal care, health facility deliveries, sleeping under insecticide-treated mosquito nets, exclusive breastfeeding, childbirth spacing, and seeking testing and treatment for malaria at the health facility. He also mentors other religious leaders to share health information and encourage their followers to adopt priority RMNCH+N practices. Not only does he advocate for others to change their health behavior, but he also changes his own family's health practices.

Mallam Nasarawa has seen a positive shift in health practices in his community since he began advocating for change.



"Before I became a member of SBC-ACG, I was unaware of many things concerning health care, especially in reproductive, maternal, neonatal, and child health and nutrition (RMNCH+N).... But as a member of SBC-ACG, I am now well informed about my health and seeking prompt care at the health facility... As a religious leader, I am not just saddled with the responsibility of guiding people to salvation, but also, to guide them about their lifestyle, including their health behavior."

As an SBC-ACG member, Mallam received training and mentoring from Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria and has been speaking out in the mosque and other community gatherings



"So many things have changed. My congregation is beginning to be enlightened in the areas of family planning even though we are still battling with this one, but there is a religious perspective of it, so many women want to take up contraceptive methods, but their spouses are hindering them from doing so. But it's a gradual process we shall conquer. There is much progress in the areas of exclusive breastfeeding and immunization."

According to Mallam Nasarawa, women in Bwari have responded well to his messages.



"Women in Daa'wa used to have their weekly meetings in this mosque. And I told their leader, who is at the forefront of making sure and reminding the women of the need to visit the health facility for their ANC, take their children for immunization, and ensure exclusive breastfeeding and general health practice."

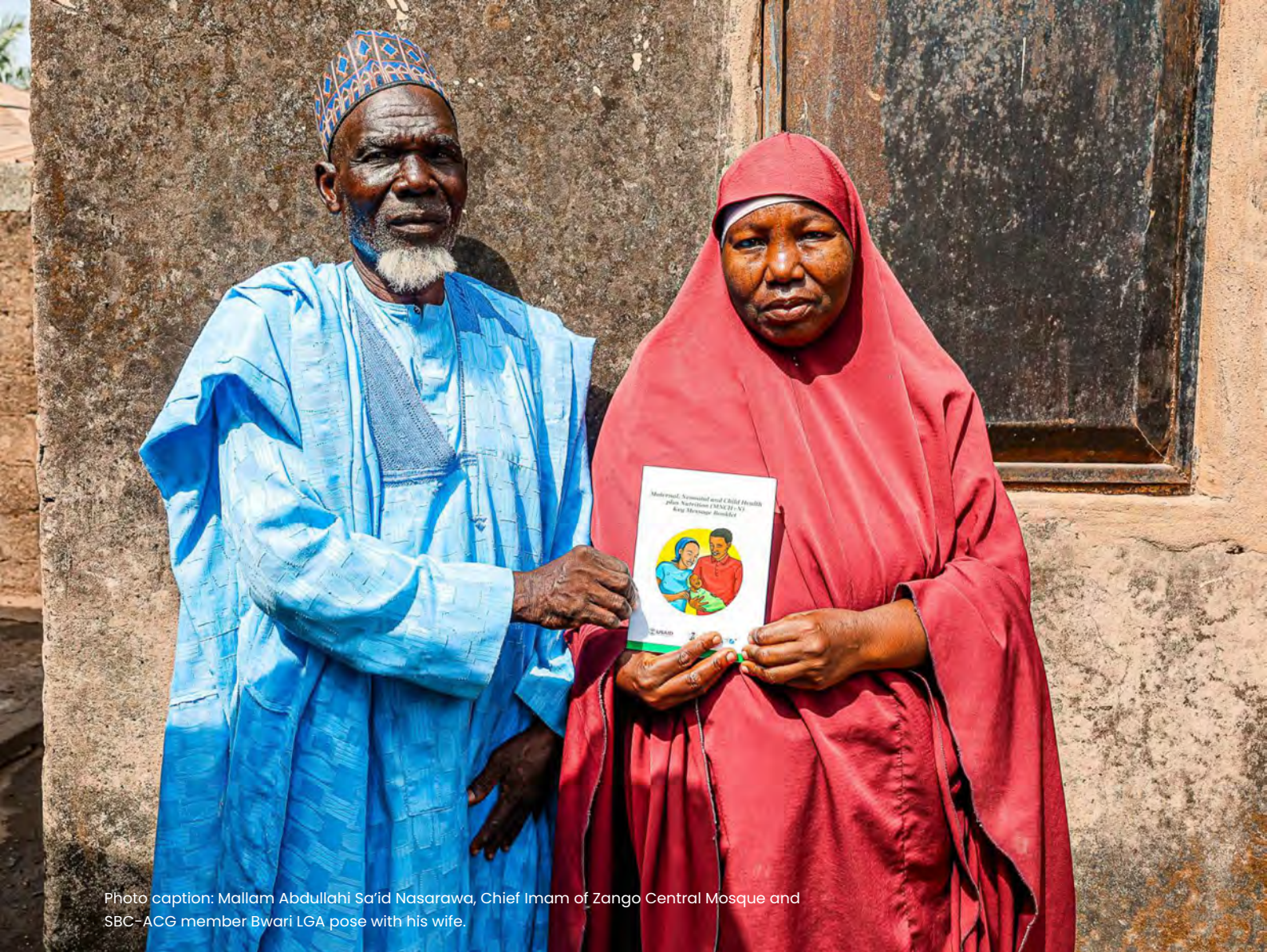


Photo caption: Mallam Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa, Chief Imam of Zango Central Mosque and SBC-ACG member Bwari LGA pose with his wife.

His wife has been particularly supportive and shares health information with her fellow women.



"My wife is very supportive; she has a copy of the RMNCH+N Key Message Booklet (the Hausa version). She understands everything in the booklet and disseminates those messages anytime they go to their women's gathering. What she found amazing was the importance of colostrum that women used to throw away. That colostrum contains all the nutrients the newborn needs.."

Mallam Nasarawa has lost count of the people he has influenced to practice RMNCH+N priority behaviors.



"I can't ascertain how many people listen to me during sermons. But I guess my teachings are influencing many. Some will come to me secretly to get more clarification from what I told them during the sermon. I refer them to the Holy Quran with verses to read on their own to understand that every human activity in today's modern world has its root in the Holy Scripture"



One Man's Journey to Becoming an Advocate

Photo Caption: Mallam Idrisu Ibrahim is the Chief Imam of Sarkin Bwari Central Mosque and SBC ACG Member, Bwari Area Council, FCT.

This is the story of one man's journey from starkly opposing modern healthcare practices to becoming a strong supporter in the Bwari Area Council in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Mallam Idrisu Ibrahim was outspoken in his opposition to contraception, childhood immunization and most of the government's priority health practices. He also supported female genital mutilation and early child marriages. He joined the Bwari Area Council Social Behavior Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG). Participation in learning sessions organized by Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria and discussions with other Muslim leaders and SBC-ACG members changed his attitude. Mallam Idrisu Ibrahim now encourages women to attend antenatal care, exclusively breastfeed their babies and seek care from health facilities.

Mallam Idrisu Ibrahim is the chief Imam of Sarkin Bwari Central Mosque. As a powerful influencer and religious leader in Bwari Area Council, Mallam discouraged his followers from practicing most of the government's priority health behaviors. Mallam did not believe in the effectiveness of immunization for children and actively discouraged his followers from immunizing their children. He had a long history of preventing health workers from immunizing his children. He was even known to ban staff of Bwari Area Council Health Department and FCT Primary Health Care Board from visiting his household during house-to-house immunization exercises.

To change his attitude, Bwari Area Council Health Department invited Mallam to join the SBC-ACG, a group of traditional, religious, and women leaders who promote priority health practices among their communities. However, even as an SBC-ACG member, he spoke against most priority health practices and in favor of dangerous cultural practices, arguing that religious teachings supported his beliefs.

During SBC-ACG meetings, Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria conducted learning sessions on priority health practices. Mallam's fellow Imams corrected every point and proof Mallam presented to justify speaking against those behaviors. During private meetings, the SBC-ACG co-chairman and other religious leaders also engaged with him to correct some of his justifications for opposing healthy practices.



Mallam Idrisu went through a remarkable transformation. Instead of opposing health practices, he encouraged women to access health facilities and services. He now infuses his religious teachings with information about antenatal care (ANC), exclusive breastfeeding, and seeking services from health facilities. He has also changed his family's health practices.



*"Being a member of SBC-ACG has affected me... As an SBC-ACG member, saddled with the responsibility to advocate for positive change on health-related matters, I have to practice these priority health behaviors, which I am not used to doing. I do them now. Like immunization for my children, exclusive breastfeeding, seeking prompt care at the health facility, antenatal care.... As a religious leader, you must practice what you preach, or the people will think you are misleading them. When they see you practicing these behaviors, they will adopt them because they look up to you for guidance." **Mallam Idrisu Ibrahim, Chief Imam of Sarkin Bwari central mosque***



Photo caption: Mallam Abdullahi Sa'id Nasarawa, Chief Imam of Zango Central Mosque and SBC-ACG member Bwari Area Council pose with his wife.

Mallam's wives help him to promote priority health practices among women. Mallam explains, *"During the Ramadan fasting, women usually have sessions of Tafseer too, just like the men do. My wives are the ones who disseminate these priority behaviors to the women, encouraging them to breastfeed their babies exclusively within six months of birth, encouraging them to go for ANC as soon as they realize they are pregnant, etc. My wives follow up with other women who do not go for ANC or take their children for immunization"*

It is too soon to tell how many people in Bwari Area Council have changed their health practices since Mallam's conversion. He says, *"Behavioral change is a gradual process, but I am confident that most people are beginning to change and are taking their health seriously now. We can only continue with what we are doing so that the next generation of people will come and adopt these behaviors and sustain them."*



Shaping a Healthier Future:

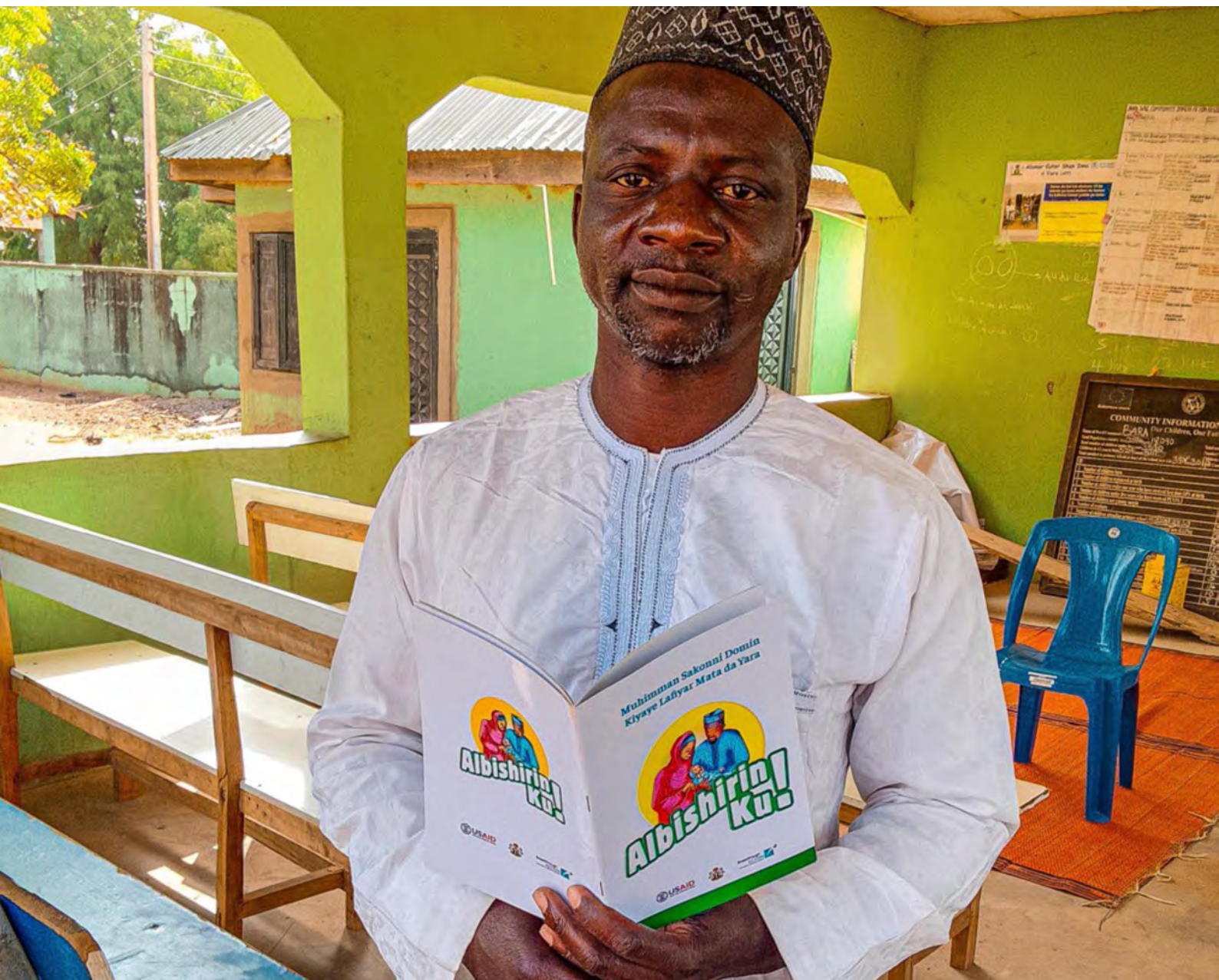
A Transformative Journey of Immunization Advocacy Local Community Leadership

Photo Caption: Abdullahi-Garba, SBC ACG member sensitizing a couple

In Bara, Kirfi Local Government Area, Bauchi State, children have a low immunisation rate. Parents are reluctant to immunize their children for several reasons: misinformation on immunization, the cost of transport, the immediate side effects of vaccinations and the reluctance to discuss the topic among themselves. In 2018, local religious leader Imam Abdullahi-Garba became an SBC-ACG member. SBC-ACG is a group of concerned influentials who want to effect positive change in their communities. Members of this group include traditional religious leaders, health workers, media representatives and government health officials. All members of the group receive training through Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria to be able to speak knowledgeably on priority health issues. As a member, Imam Abdullahi-Garba uses his influence and voice to help the local community understand the importance of immunizing their children. His efforts have created a lasting positive effect on the community, where they have seen a large increase in the number of families taking their children to health centers for immunizations.

Abdullahi-Garba is an Imam in Bara, Kirfi Local Government Area, Bauchi State. In his area, couples are reluctant to immunize their children. "Couples hardly discuss the issue of

immunization of their children because they do not understand its value to the children” he explains. When it is discussed, often one parent is in favor of immunization while the other is against it. ‘Sometimes, the mother will be willing to take the child for immunization, but the husband will decline consent. In other cases, the husband will push the child to get inoculated, but the mother will be adamant for some flimsy excuses,’ he says. The reason for their reluctance differs. “For most of these women, normally refuse to get these children inoculated because of the adverse events following immunization. The women complain of excessive crying by the children for a whole day after being vaccinated.” Abdullahi-Garba says that ‘some husbands do not know the value of immunization...To some of these men, their children are healthy and hearty and therefore do not need any immunization.’



Abdullahi-Garba uses his influence as a leading member of the religious community to help spread awareness on immunization. “I go to the primary health center on immunization days to emphasize to them the need to ensure they complete all the visits and that they should endure the little discomfort the children will find themselves in after the immunization.” The primary health center is not the only place he uses his voice to spread awareness. ‘I also pass

the messages to people during sermons on Fridays and during traditional gatherings.'

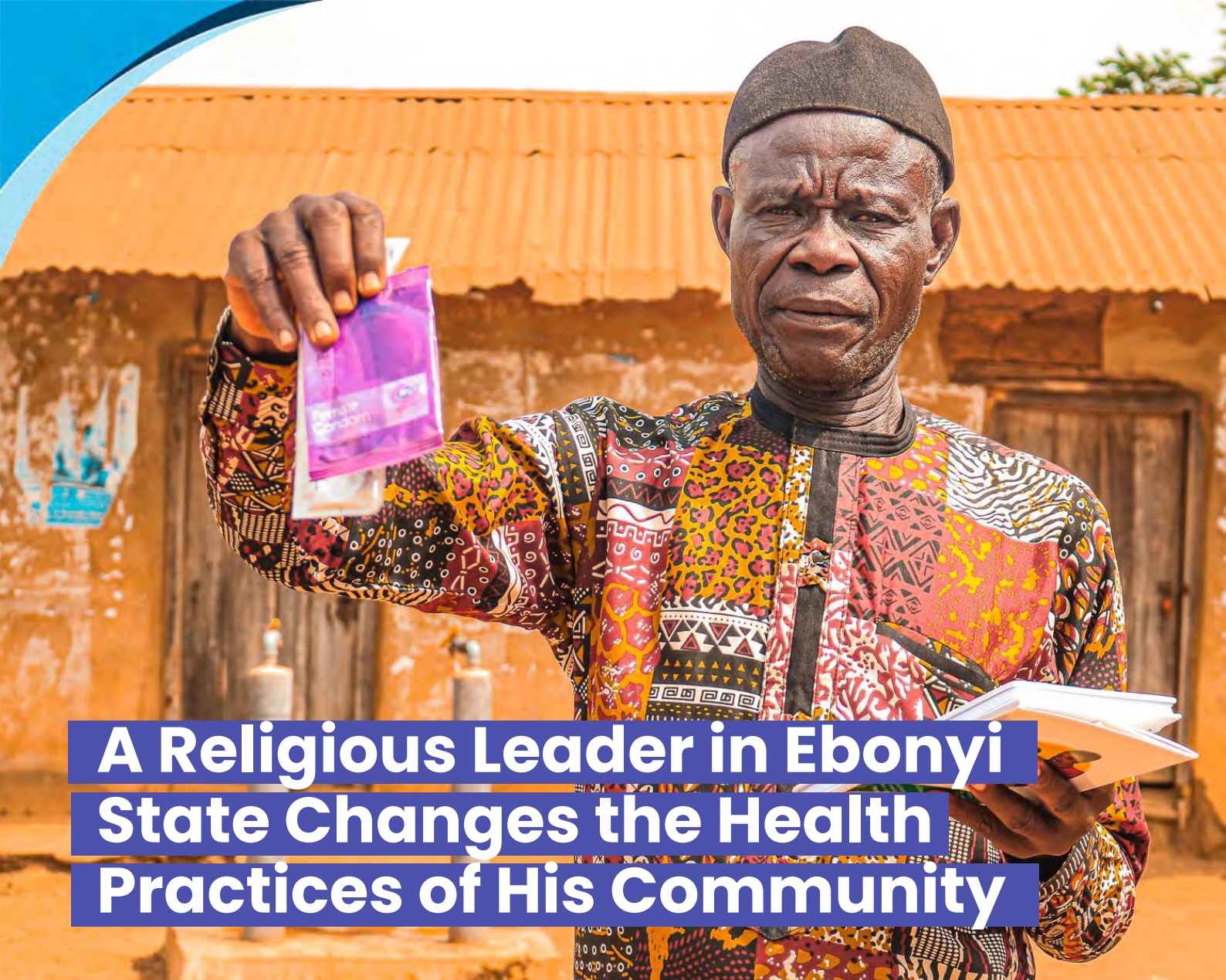
When speaking to families, Abdullah-Garba provides the necessary information for them to make an informed choice. He has been 'educating people that immunization is meant to protect children from diseases in the future. We tell them that immunization is preventative and not a curative intervention when a child is sick. We help them understand that immunization lessens the severity of diseases in children.'

Imam Abdullah-Garba is not the only one working to educate families. Through the mentorship program, wherein Abdullah-Garba teaches other religious leaders methods of effectively communicating about immunization, he can spread information more widely. 'I submitted two names, and all of them have been trained, and they are now conducting sermons and pre-sermon sessions,' he says. 'Thus, helping to spread priority behaviors to more people.'

In response to his efforts, there has been a notable increase in families immunizing their children. "Because of these sensitizations, many people have now embraced the habit of immunizing their children," he says. "Couples now discuss among themselves to resolve their differences and understand themselves."



The Imam is excited to see the change in the number of families immunizing their children. "It is a thing of joy that people are accepting and practicing what I have been preaching to them. It is important to me because I am discharging my responsibility as a religious leader to the people...it gives me the impetus and the zeal to continue this work." He is not only proud of the work in a personal sense, he believes his work is important to the community. 'Once families are healthy, you will have a productive society.'



A Religious Leader in Ebonyi State Changes the Health Practices of His Community

This is the story of change in a rural community in Izzi Local Government Area (LGA) of Ebonyi State. Until 2021, most women in Ndiakaparata Agbaja delivered their children at home or the chemist and relied on the services of a chemist for other health needs. Husbands and mothers-in-law encouraged these practices because it was a community tradition. In 2021, Catechist Alfred Nwizi joined the LGA Social Behaviour Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG). He received training from Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria to speak out in favor of the government's priority health practices. He began encouraging his parishioners to use the health facility for antenatal care (ANC), childbirth, and other health services.

In partnership, Catechist Nwizi, the parish priest and the Catholic Women's Organization (CWO) issued a proclamation declaring that all women attend ANC during pregnancy and that husbands support their wives to deliver at health facilities, and helped establish community transportation services for pregnant women to reach the health facility. Many more couples are seeking services from the health facility, which has positively impacted the community's overall health.

Ndiakaparata Agbaja is a rural community in Izzi Local Government Area (LGA), Ebonyi State.

In 2021, when Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria began working in the LGA, women relied on chemists and traditional healers whenever they or their children were sick. Most women used the chemist for ANC and delivery or delivered their children at home with traditional birth attendants. This had been the practice for generations. Husbands and mothers-in-law encouraged this practice, and discouraged health facility services. Many men and women believed that the medicine at the health facility could have been better and that the distance to the health facility was too far and expensive. Many also believed that women who deliver at home are strong and that delivering at home saves money for husbands.



Photo Caption: Catechist Alfred Nwizi, Social Behaviour Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG), Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state.

In 2021, Ebonyi State formed a Social Behavior Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG) in Izzi LGA. SBC-ACG members include traditional and religious leaders, health workers, media house representatives, and women leaders. With support from the Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria project, SBC-ACG members received training to speak with their communities about priority reproductive, maternal, neonatal, and child health and nutrition (RMNCH+N).



Catechist Alfred Nwizi is a religious leader who supports 28 out-stations of the Catholic Church under St Patrick Parish Isiogo; He is one of the SBC-ACG members trained and mentored by Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria in Izzi LGA in July 2021. Since then, he has been a firm supporter of the government's priority health practices, encouraging his parishioners to adopt regular ANC during pregnancy, to deliver at health facilities, and to get tested and treated for Malaria at a health facility. Catechist Nwizi spoke about priority health practices during sermons and village meetings.



"When we were undergoing training to use our position and influence to change positive health behaviors around RMNCH+N, at first, I thought it would not be possible to change the negative practices of ANC visits and delivery at the chemist and home and treating all fever as Malaria with local herbs and drugs from chemist because it is deeply rooted in our culture, but when I and others began sensitizing using the church and meetings, I discovered that it impacted positively not just to the immediate families but to the community at large."

Catechist Alfred Nwizi, SBC-ACG member in Izzi LGA



Photo Caption: Catechist Alfred Nwizi, Social Behaviour Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG), Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state conducting a speakout to Catholic Women's Organization (CWO) of St Patrick Parish Isiogo.

Catechist Nwizi, together with the parish priest and Catholic Women's Organization (CWO) of St Patrick Parish Isiogo, declared their full support for RMNCH+N and made a series of pronouncements that every woman who is pregnant in the parish must show proof of ANC registration at the health center to the parish and the CWO and that men must live up to their responsibilities by supporting their wives to attend ANC and deliver at the health facility. In addition, St Patrick's parish priest declared that money should not hinder accessing services at the health center, especially among pregnant women. After the pronouncement, Catechist Nwizi began supporting communities to establish transportation systems for pregnant women so they could deliver at the health center. These efforts have spurred many families to use health facilities for their health needs, including ANC and delivery.



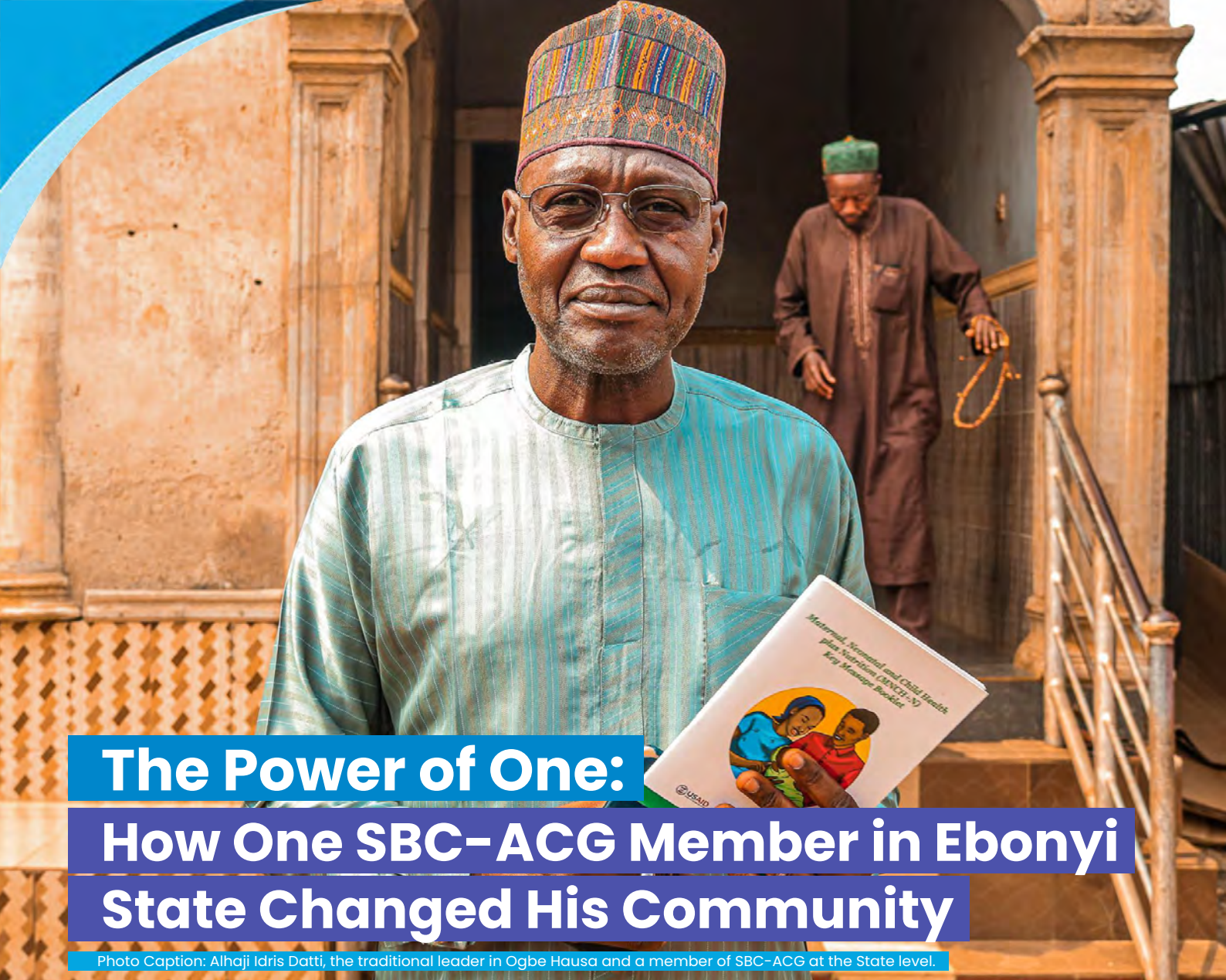
Photo Caption: Catechist Alfred Nwizi, Social Behaviour Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG), Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state conducting a one-on-one speakout Mrs Chinenye Nwaoga, a beneficiary.

Mrs Chinenye Nwaoga describes how Catechist Nwizi's messages have changed her life, "*The health message my husband and I received from Catechist Alfred Nwizi in St Anthony catholic church Ndiakparata hammering on the benefits of health facility delivery and going to health facility whenever we are sick helped me understand the gain of going to the health facility and in my third pregnancy my husband supported me and I registered for ANC at the health facility and later delivered in the same health facility, and the baby is alive and healthy. The arrival of a live baby restored happiness in my home. Because of the death of my two children, whom I delivered at the chemist, my husband's people were not happy with me for my inability to give them a live baby, and my husband, too, was not happy. I thank God today I have my child alive because I delivered at the health facility. I am currently pregnant, and I didn't waste time to begin ANC visits at the health facility. Everyone is happy in my family. I appreciate our Catechist for the message in the Church that turned my story around.*"



Photo Caption: Catechist Alfred Nwizi, Social Behaviour Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG), Izzi LGA, Ebonyi state with a beneficiary

According to Catechist Nwizi, communities in his area have changed and benefited from the change. He says, *"First, husbands are at peace; they are no longer scared of what will happen to the woman and baby after delivery. Secondly, we no longer hear cases of a woman delivering and bleeding started. Thirdly we no longer hear about a pregnant mother or her child dying after delivery because she delivered at home or chemist, the sadness in families because of the series of deaths of mother and children has been replaced with peace and happiness. The woman that delivered is strong enough to support herself, unlike before, when she cannot come out for days because of pains and trauma from home delivery."*



The Power of One: How One SBC-ACG Member in Ebonyi State Changed His Community

Photo Caption: Alhaji Idris Datti, the traditional leader in Ogbe Hausa and a member of SBC-ACG at the State level.

One predominantly Muslim community in the heart of the capital city of Ebonyi State has witnessed great changes in the use of health facilities for antenatal care (ANC), delivery assistance, and Malaria testing and treatment, largely due to the efforts of one traditional leader and SBC-ACG member. Alhaji Idris Datti has been trained and mentored by Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria to speak out about priority health practices and the social norms and beliefs that hinder their uptake. He regularly encourages early ANC, health facility delivery, childbirth spacing, prompt testing and treatment for fever during Friday sermons, daily morning prayers, and community gatherings, and counters common misconceptions and social norms that hinder these practices. Previously, many women in this community accessed health services for Malaria and other health complaints at the chemist or used local herbs delivered at home. Now, more and more women are accessing services from health facilities.

Ogbe Hausa is a Muslim community in Abakpa ward of Ebonyi Local Government Area (LGA), in the heart of the capital city of Ebonyi State. As in many communities in Ebonyi State,

maternal and neonatal mortality and fertility rates are high. When Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria began working in “Ogbe Hausa” (Northern Nigeria Peoples Community), most women got health information and services from the chemist shop, used local herbs to treat themselves and their families, and delivered their babies at home.



“Due to these practices, we lost many of our women through complications resulting from home delivery. We have a woman who didn’t attend ANC and attempted home delivery, and complications arose before getting to the hospital; it was late, and we lost the woman and her baby. These incidents put fears in our women and men...” **Alhaji Idris Datti, the traditional leader in Ogbe Hausa and a member of SBC-ACG at the State level.**

Through a Human-Centered Design process, the project learned that deeply entrenched social norms and common misconceptions reinforced these practices. Most women in Ogbe Hausa shied away from the health facility because they trusted the chemist, and their husbands did not support using it. Many women believed that home delivery proved them strong and saved their husbands from the expense of delivering in the health facility. It was also commonly believed that a woman should deliver her first child at the health facility to determine whether it would be safe to deliver subsequent children at home. Many men and women in the community also believe that the use of modern contraception is against their religion and limits God's blessings.

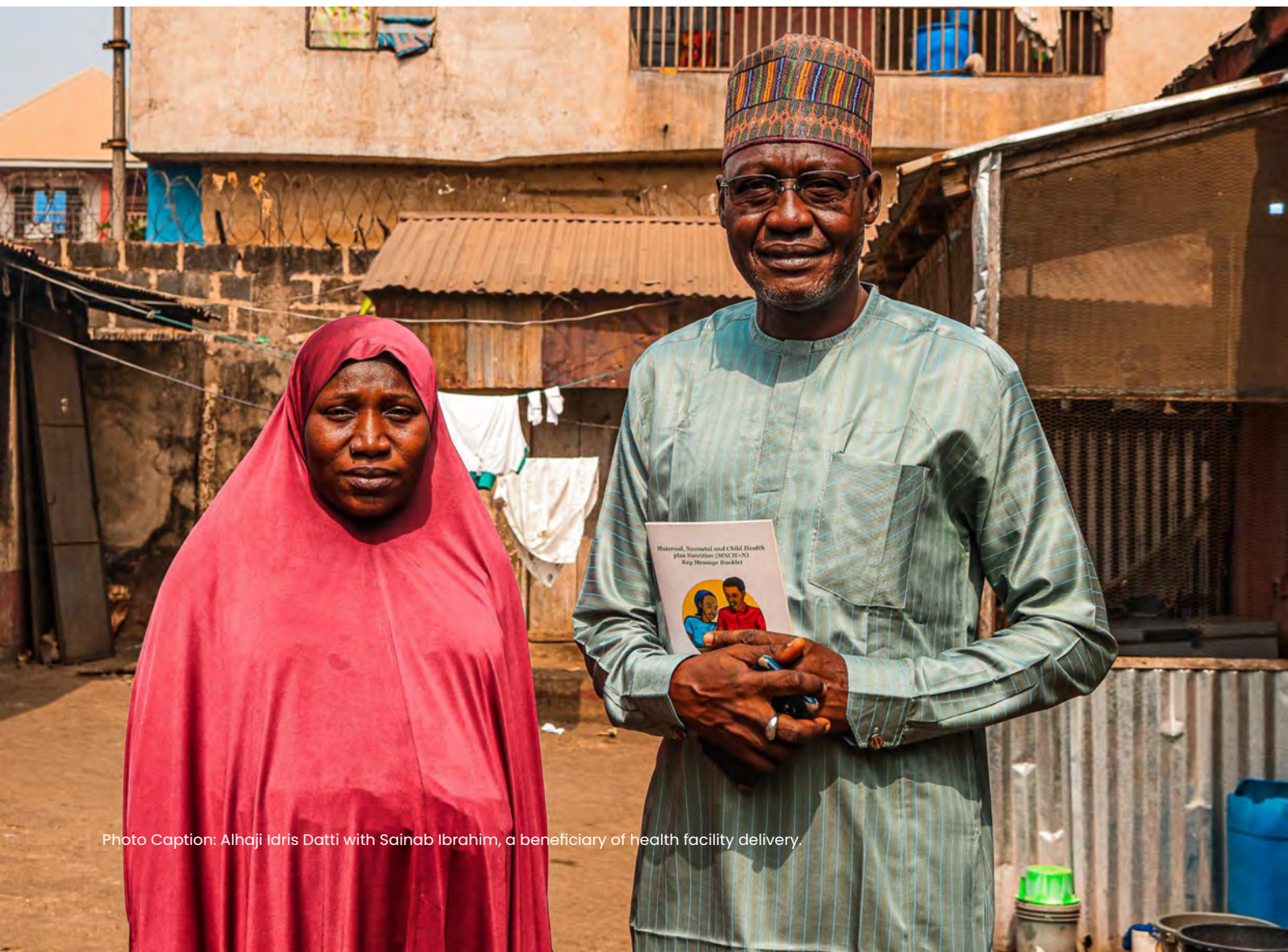


Photo Caption: Alhaji Idris Datti with Sainab Ibrahim, a beneficiary of health facility delivery.



Photo Caption: Alhaji Idris Datti with Sainab Ibrahim's husband, a beneficiary of health facility delivery.

Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria worked with Ebonyi State to form a social and behavior change advocacy core group (SBC-ACG) at the State level. Among its members is Alhaji Idris Datti, the traditional leader of Ogbe Hausa. The project trained SBC-ACG members to promote priority health practices like ANC, health facility deliveries, malaria testing and treatment, and childbirth spacing and to speak out about social norms and beliefs that prevent community members from practicing these lifesaving behaviors. Alhaji Idris Datti of Ogbe Hausa became an active advocate in his community.

Recognizing his role in influencing men and women in Ogbe Hausa to shift their beliefs and access services at the health center, Alhaji Idris Datti infused messages about life-saving health practices into Friday services, daily morning prayers, and community gatherings. His messaging helps dispel myths and misconceptions about health facility delivery, early ANC visits, and testing before treating Malaria and beseeches men to support their wives to access services and information from the health facility.



Photo Caption: Alhaji Idris Datti, the traditional leader in Ogbe Hausa and a member of SBC-ACG at the State level conducting a speakout in the mosque.

"I normally use the teachings of prophet Muhamed on the adoption of the health priority behaviors I am advocating for and on the men's roles in supporting their wives to access services at the health facility. This I regularly do by infusing it in sermons at Jumat and daily morning prayers, which goes beyond the men as women listen in their home during morning prayers and come to ask for clarification in the areas, they didn't get it clear." **Alhaji Idris Datti, Traditional Leader, Ogbe Hausa, Ebonyi State.**

Following the series of speeches in the central Mosque Ogbe Hausa and community meetings, the community has seen more women accessing ANC, health facility deliveries, testing and treatment for malaria, and childbirth spacing services. Men are also more supportive of women using health facility services.

According to community members, the changes in Ogbe Hausa happened because Alhaji Iddris Datti linked health messages with the teachings of the Q'uran and because the community had great respect for him as someone who could not mislead them.



*"Alhaji Idris Datti is well respected as our traditional leader of the Muslim community in Ogbe Hausa, and we know he wishes well for us. My husband gave me money to register for an ANC visit in my third pregnancy after the message on the ANC visit he heard at the Friday Mosque, and many other women like me are also being supported by their husbands to attend and deliver at MCH Azuiyokwu due to the health message their husband heard too in the Mosque." **Sainab Ibrahim, a beneficiary.***

A photograph of a man, Mr. Lazarus Onyibe, standing outdoors in a rural setting. He is wearing a vibrant, multi-colored patterned shirt. He is holding a white booklet titled "Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health plus Nutrition (MNCH-N) Key Message Booklet". The booklet features an illustration of a family (a man, a woman, and a child) and the USAID logo. The background shows a dirt path and some trees.

A Youth Leader Inspires Change in a Rural Community in Ebonyi

Photo Credit: Mr Lazarus Onyibe, SBC ACG Member, Ebonyi LGA, Ebonyi state.

This story describes how one youth leader influenced positive change in Ofrekpe Ishieke, a rural community in Ebonyi. Mr Lazarus Onyibe joined the Social Behavior Change Advocacy Core Group (SBC-ACG) in Ebonyi Local Government Area (LGA) as the representative from Ofrekpe Ishieke in 2018. After training and mentoring by Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria, he began advocating for improved health practices during church services, village meetings and home visits. Through his efforts, leaders of churches in the community now encourage their followers to seek care from health facilities rather than traditional healers, chemists, and traditional birth attendants. It is not unusual now for men to send their wives for antenatal care (ANC) and health facility deliveries and to visit health facilities for testing when they have fever—practices that were uncommon before 2018.

Ofrekpe Ishieke in Egwudinagu is a rural community in Ebonyi LGA, a one-hour drive from the capital city. As in many rural communities in Ebonyi, maternal, newborn, child health, and nutrition statistics were poor, and malaria deaths were unacceptably common in 2018 when Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria began Intervention. This was largely because most men and women avoided seeking care from the local health facility, preferring the services of

traditional healers and the chemist shop. Women preferred the services of traditional birth attendants over professionally trained midwives at the health facility.

Although there were several reasons for these choices, beliefs, misconceptions, and social norms dictating male behavior played a key role. Few men supported their wives to visit the health facility for ANC or delivery assistance, believing it is not their role, that it is more expensive than a TBA or chemist, that facilities will not discharge their wives if they cannot pay the bill, and that women will be kept in hospital for a long time after delivery and unable to go about their normal business of caring for children and home. Both men and women believed that women who deliver at home are strong, and trusted traditional healers and chemists to treat illnesses which cannot be handled in health facilities.



Photo Caption: Mr Lazarus Onyibe, SBC ACG Member, Ebonyi LGA, Ebonyi state, conducting community speakouts.

"Before now, most pregnant women got health services and information about ANC and delivery from the chemist and TBAs that are littered in our community. Fever in our community is generally regarded as Malaria, and local herbs and over-the-counter drugs from chemist shops are best used. Women feel it is a pride to deliver at home and chemist as it saves cost and time. In addition, the husband did not support seeking health care at the health facility because they feel it is not their role". **Mr Lazarus Onyibe, SBC-ACG member in Ofrekpe Ishieke.**

In 2018, Breakthrough ACTION Nigeria partnered with Ebonyi State Primary Health Care Department to establish a Social and Behaviour Change Core Advocacy Group in Ebonyi LGA composed of religious, traditional, and community leaders with great influence. Mr Lazarus Onyibe, a youth leader of Ofrekpe Ishieke community, became a member. Together with other group members, he received training and mentoring on priority health behaviors recommended by the government and the social and gender norms that affect their uptake. Mr. Lazarus became a firm advocate and set out to foster change in his community. He began speaking with community members during village meetings and church services at St. Lazarus and St. Paul's Catholic churches on the importance of early ANC visits at health facilities, delivery with skilled birth attendance, testing before treating Malaria, and the importance of men accepting and influencing others to use health facility services. He also visited men in their homes and meeting places, encouraging them to support their pregnant women to access services at the health facility; and urged pregnant women and mothers of young children to adopt protective health practices. The religious leaders of the churches where Mr Lazarus speaks have endorsed the practices he promotes and urge their congregations to follow Mr Lazarus' advice, ensuring that it aligns with the church's teachings.



*"My participation in [SBC-ACG] and training opened my eyes to realize that ... deaths among mother and children in my community are due to social and gender norms... Through the new knowledge I got, I regularly leverage village meetings and churches, which are majorly the social life of our people, to sensitize women and men on the importance of accessing health services at the health center, especially ANC and delivery and the need for the husband to support his wife by giving money, offering transportation, providing nutritious meals and follow her to ANC as time permits. The parish priest of St Lazarus parish endorsed his support for women to access health services at the health facility as it aligns with the church's teachings. He will help to reduce ... deaths of pregnant women and their children and charged congregants always to seek health services at the health facility." - **Mr. Lazarus Onyibe, SBC-ACG member in Ebonyi LGA.***



Photo Caption: Mr Lazarus Onyibe, SBC ACG Member, Ebonyi LGA, Ebonyi state, conducting one-on-one sensitisation to Cecilia Nwaophoke, a beneficiary.

Mr Lazarus' sessions during church and village meetings became a turning point for many families in Ofrekpe Ishieke community. Many women now access ANC, delivery assistance, and fever management at health facilities, often with their husbands or family members, and most men now support their wives to access health facility services and information. Many women also seek health services for themselves and their children at health facilities.

*"In my fourth pregnancy, I heard about the importance of early ANC visits, delivery at the health facilities and shunning all TBAs and chemist practices during pregnancy from Mr Lazarus in the Church. Our Reverend Father – Rev Emmanuel, also supported the message. Before the message at the Church, the chemist shop I went to when I was having severe pains told me I was carrying twins, and the pains I was having were a sign of labor and I will deliver by 6 pm in the evening, and that never happened even after 12 hours. My husband, on his part, did not support health facility delivery as he felt it was expensive, and so he refused to support me in accessing health care at the health facility. For fear of my life, as I was between life and death in the pains I was having, I went to Mr Lazarus, who supported me with visits to Onyirigbo health facility. I was properly checked by the health provider and sent for [a scan], and it was discovered that it was not a set of twins nor signs of labor but that the baby was not in a good position and that I would have lost the child if I had delayed a little longer. I was given some medicine and placed on close monitoring, and this helped me to regain my strength and became fit to carry the pregnancy to term, and I delivered successfully. If not for that timely message from Mr. Lazarus in the Church that helped me make independent decisions without waiting for my husband's support, I would have lost my life and that of my child. Since that experience, my husband has supported me in delivering my fifth child at the health facility, and we, as a family, are now using the health facilities for other health services. The constant sickness in my home, especially to my children because we did not test before treating ailments, is no longer there, we have learnt the importance of testing fever before treating Malaria, and my husband is now insisting that we access all health services at the health facility because of the peace of mind he is enjoying and the cost it saves for him." – **Cecilia Nwaophoke, a beneficiary.***

Men, women, and children have benefitted from Mr. Lazarus' life-saving information. Mr. Benard Ophoke narrates that he is alive today because of Mr. Lazarus' timely advice.



Photo Caption: Mr Lazarus Onyibe, SBC ACG Member, Ebonyi LGA, Ebonyi state, conducting one-on-one sensitisation to Mr. Benard Nwaophoke, a beneficiary.

I was sick with fever and body pain, and I thought it was Malaria, and because I strongly believe in traditional medicine, I used various herbs and still did not get better. Rather got worse that I could not eat nor walk, and I thought I was going to die, and so did every other person around me. For fear of death, I remembered what Mr. Lazarus taught us in our meeting always to seek health services from the health facility, and he came around to visit me and reinforce the message. That was when I visited the health center; it was the first time in my life. I was diagnosed with typhoid fever and Malaria after undergoing a series of tests, and I was given an injection and some medicine. The medicine and injection worked like magic. Sweat ran down my body, and suddenly I stood up and became hungry. For the first time in many months, I ate food, walked around, and became well again, and I was so happy. This experience opened my eyes and mind to believe in the importance of seeking health services at the health facility, especially the need for testing before treatment and not seeing every fever as Malaria....Honestly, the experience made me become an advocate of seeking care services at the health facility starting from my home as I supported my wife in her fifth pregnancy to register for ANC and deliver at the health facility for the first time after years of our marriage by giving her money, transporting her, and providing good food."

Mr. Benard Nwaophoke, a beneficiary.



A Religious Leader in Sokoto Inspires Healthy Changes in Sokoto

Over the past three decades, maternal and newborn mortality has decreased globally. However, maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition (MNCH + N) outcomes in Nigeria continue to be among the worst in the world despite a series of interventions. Expanding access to MNCH+N-related services in Nigeria remains a public health concern, particularly in northern Nigeria, where patriarchal structures are prevalent and men are often the sole decision-makers.

Insights have shown that religious and traditional leaders serve as influential people who shape the norms that impact maternal and child health practices. The USAID-funded Breakthrough ACTION-Nigeria project worked with religious and community leaders in Sokoto state since 2017 to implement the Advocacy Core Group (ACG) model. Influential religious and traditional leaders from surrounding communities are organized into Social and Behaviour Change- Advocacy Core Groups (SBC-ACGs). Within this structure, together, they collaborate to reflect on the harmful practices within their community that a shift in norms can address. They then use their platforms, status and influence to pass on positive messages during religious and traditional gatherings that promote changes in harmful social norms, beliefs and practices related to MNCH+N behaviors.

Reverend Iliya Ibrahim became an SBC-ACG member in 2019. He has used his influence through religious teachings and scriptures to share messages encouraging community members to reduce harmful practices and promote positive MNCH+N behaviors. He has used his platforms to dispel myths, misconceptions and the cultural practice of not using colostrum

at birth. Colostrum is well-nourished breast milk that comes from a woman immediately after delivery and is beneficial for the newborn. A cultural practice in the area discourages women from doing this and instead promotes washing the colostrum. He emphasizes the importance of early breastfeeding initiation within one hour after delivery, exclusive breastfeeding and completing all antenatal visits. He also discusses the importance of male engagement, spousal communication, and support for MNCH+N care.



"Yes, I can say yes with confidence because I'm a preacher, a pastor with a congregation of over 200 people that I'm always leading in different capacities and ways; through that, my people always listen to my voice and obey what I'm saying because they believe I cannot lie to them and whatever I will tell them is the truth and what will help them. This is why I speak out, and they listen to me. I believe in that way; I get a different result through my members."



"With the help of Pastor Illiya Ibrahim, who teaches us about exclusive breastfeeding during church service, I decided to practice it. If you look at my children now, even though they were premature when I gave birth to them, they look healthier than most children. He also encouraged us to go for immunization, which I am grateful for. There are a lot of benefits to exclusive breastfeeding. it makes your child healthy, and if I give birth again, I will still practice and preach exclusive breastfeeding."

- Peace David, Congregant of Reverend Illiya.



"I have benefited from exclusive breastfeeding because this is not the first time I have practiced it. Exclusive breastfeeding is hard to sustain for a long period, especially for two babies. However, because of the help and continued encouragement from Rev Illiya, I indulged it. These boys have hardly fallen sick, and they look very healthy. I recommend all mothers to practice it."

- Precious Silas, Congregant of Reverend Illiya Ibrahim.

Since July 2019, 207 religious and traditional leaders in Sokoto state have made 4,934 Speak Outs, reaching people with messages supporting positive social and gender norms and behaviors. Speak Outs and social and behavior change interventions implemented by religious leaders such as Reverend Illiya in Sokoto state have contributed to thousands of mothers like Precious and Peace accessing health services.



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