

Promotion of preventive measures:

Including vaccination against COVID-19 among older people in Tanzania



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HelpAge Tanzania: Promoting COVID-19 vaccine access and uptake among older people and other priority groups

The project was designed to improve uptake of COVID-19 vaccines in Tanzania across all the priority target groups including older people. Older people have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic—they are most at risk of severe illness and death, due to age-related risks and the higher prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The data from Mwanza and Kigoma regions showed that around 60 per cent of deaths are caused by NCDs and some older people are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, such as those who receive one-to-one care where two-meter social distancing is not possible, or where older people are caregivers for their grandchildren who engages socially with the wider community. Although, the Government of Tanzania has not published age disaggregated data on COVID-19 infections and deaths, anecdotal information shows that in Tanzania like in other countries, older people are more prone to severe consequences including death from COVID-19. As of 10 September 2021, 323,472 persons has been vaccinated with only 1.6 per cent being older people 60 years and above. Many factors were contributing to vaccine hesitancy among older people including barriers to accessing credible information on the vaccine, challenges in delivering credible messages to remote rural areas, poor quality of the translation of

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messages, and high levels of anxiety amongst older people. Myths about the vaccines and the origin of the virus has spread across various communities. Consequently, this has negatively impacted COVID-19 vaccine uptake among older people. Limited exposure to media to obtain appropriate information about the vaccine, isolation, low literacy levels, limited health-seeking behavior, and ageism existing both in communities and among the professionals.

The goal of this project is to improve community mobilisation and increase awareness about the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccines and preventive measures to avoid contracting the infection. The project was aimed is to reach at least 2,736 older people in two regions of Mwanza and Kigoma vaccinated in two months. The project was aimed at improving COVID-19 vaccine access, confidence and uptake among older people and expanding reach to other marginalised groups at risk, including people with disability.

Older people are the age group most at risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19. WHO SAGE guidelines highlight the importance of achieving high primary series coverage rates among higher priority groups, including older people, before offering vaccine doses to lower priority use groups to achieve impact from vaccines and to ensure equity. Despite this, COVID-19 vaccine access and uptake among older people in Tanzania is low, with only 1.6 per cent of older people out of 323,472 persons has been vaccinated as of 10 September 2021. This situation is attributed to several reasons, including:

- **Lack of access to trusted and reliable information** on COVID-19 vaccines in formats that meet the diverse communication needs of different groups of older people, including poor translation of messages delivered in the most remote rural areas. This is leading to the spread of misinformation and myths which contribute to vaccine hesitancy among older people.
- **Distortion of correct information** on COVID-19 vaccines by younger generations who are expected to be the allies in promoting correct information about the vaccines due to their online exposure.
- **Difficulty travelling long distances** to the vaccination centre among older people, people with chronic illnesses and/or disability, and those who are home bound.
- **Failures to engage older people** and those working with them in the design and delivery of vaccine rollout, and limited understanding of the needs of older people within immunisation systems traditionally focused on maternal and child health.

The project focused on promoting vaccination among older people - lead community mobilisation and awareness-raising for preventive measures including vaccination against COVID-19 among themselves and the community at large, targeting to get at least 2,736 older people in two regions of Mwanza and Kigoma vaccinated in two months.



To address barriers to COVID-19 vaccine access and improve uptake, HelpAge Tanzania implemented the following interventions with support from UNICEF:

- **Facilitated community dialogues, and peer-to-peer campaigns** at various district levels, in collaboration with the COVID-19 task vaccination committee, and influential leaders and stakeholders to understand the barriers to vaccination and raise awareness and support community discussion, and address concerns and myths about COVID-19 vaccines.
- Adopted **intergenerational dialogues** to facilitate discussions between various stakeholders in varying communities to accept correct and reliable information and create trust among different age group.
- **Intergenerational dialogues** were organised in collaboration with the COVID-19 Task Committees, vaccination team, and critical influential community



One of the village level dialogues in Kakonko, DC



One of the district level dialogues in Magu DC

representatives (including religious and clan leaders, older people who are already vaccinated, and key political figures at the districts and village level) to facilitate social listening and awareness-raising events on COVID-19 vaccines to support community discussion, reflection, and address myths. Participants gained knowledge on the benefits of vaccines, and received appropriate, clear, and explicit responses to their queries.

- **Leveraged existing systems by mobilising Home-Based Care providers (HBCs) and Active Ageing Club's members (AACs)** to identify and mobilise older people for vaccination and disseminate materials and key information on COVID-19 vaccines.
- **Mentored 80 HBCs (40 women)** with clear and accurate information on the COVID-19 vaccine and supported them to visit each of their target households to disseminate COVID-19 vaccine information, identify and mobilise their clients for vaccination.
- **Supporting access to COVID-19 vaccine** for the most challenged individuals including older people, people with disabilities and older people with chronic ill-health.
- **Organised mobile vaccination sessions for most at-risk groups in the most remote rural areas**, facilitated by the local CSO ageing partners in collaboration with the vaccination teams from various districts. The target groups included older people with mobility limitations, chronic diseases, or people with other physical or mental health challenges.



One of the HBC homes visits to mobilise older people and their family members for COVID-19, Ichobela village, Magu DC



One of the mobile vaccinations' centres for most challenged individuals in Buhigwe DC, Kigoma

Key achievements

- A total of 6,899 older people in the two project regions have been vaccinated, including 234 older people who are homebound due to health conditions, disabilities, and advanced age. This has lifted the region from the least 10 regions to the first 10 regions in vaccine uptake in December 2021.
- 1,592 households and 4,480 family members have been reached with **accurate information** on COVID-19 preventive measures including the vaccines.
- 234 homebound older people and older people with disabilities (PWDs) were mobilised at several common centers to access vaccines.
- 880 other family members were reached by the HBCs and AACs, 604 (412 women) were also vaccinated during the outreach vaccination session as they were accompanying older people to the vaccine.
- 234 older people with mobility limitations, chronic diseases, or other physical or mental health challenges (176 women) and 604 caregivers (412 women) were vaccinated through the mobile vaccination sessions organised by the local CSOs and district vaccination teams.

- **Strengthened collaborations** among COVID-19 Task Committees, older people's associations, and ageing CSO partners from regions to village level thereby increasing coordination efforts in enhancing the visibility of older people and other more at-risk groups in COVID-19 vaccination programmes as key target groups.
- Following the **Intergenerational dialogues**, many participants were willing to take the vaccine and sensitisation program was done by the participants to their peers and other community members. The CSO partners vaccine statistics shows that of 6,899 older people who got the vaccine at the end of the two months, 3,338 older people (1,754 older women) decided to vaccinate just at the end of the dialogues.
- **Increased accessibility of accurate information** about COVID-19 vaccines because of open communication, dialogue, and social connectedness amongst relevant stakeholders
- **Enhanced learning and sharing** of best practices and lessons learnt among HelpAge partners in other regions of Tanzania.

Challenges

- Poor translation of messages delivered in the most remote rural areas—younger generations promoting inaccurate information about the vaccines leading to stakeholders prioritizing advocacy aimed at younger age groups
- Low literacy level among many older people and failure to tailor informal and formal advocacy initiatives to their communication needs.

Lessons learnt

- Need for **continued engagement and strengthened collaboration** with the COVID-19 Task Committees, Risk Communication and Community Engagement Pillars (RCCE), older people's associations, and local CSO partners to promote inclusive RCCE activity.
- **Peer-to-peer awareness** is key in breaking through community myths and misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Lack of sufficient data on the burden of the COVID-19 vaccine and the impact of the pandemic on the health care system means several communities were unaware or unconcerned about the spread of the virus and its impact.
- Continued spread of misinformation about the vaccine by some health care workers has increased doubts amongst older people. **Training and advocacy should be directed to healthcare workers** and individuals living in these communities on the impact of COVID-19 vaccines.
- Extend reach by **adopting an intergenerational approach** that promote dialogue and information sharing between various age-groups.

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

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