

## **COMMUNIQUÉ**

### **Issued at the Post-Tour Workshop on Study Tour to Egypt on the Role of Traditional and Religious Leaders in Strengthening Immunization Services in Nigeria**

**Valencia Hotel, Wuse 2, Abuja**

**Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

A workshop was organized to review the experiences, lessons learnt and best practices from a study tour of the immunization system in Egypt undertaken by key Traditional and Religious Leaders from some states of Northern Nigeria. Participants of the workshop included the leaders who were members of the study tour, the National Programme on Immunization and partner organizations including the EU-PRIME, The Health Reform Foundation, UNICEF and the World Health Organization. The goal of the post-tour workshop was to build on the best practices from the Egypt study tour and strengthen immunization system through the support of the Traditional and Religious Leaders in Nigeria

#### **STUDY TOUR TO EGYPT ON IMMUNIZATION FOR NIGERIAN TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

Sponsored by the European Union-Partnership to Reinforce Immunization Efficiency (EU-PRIME), the tour was undertaken to strengthen the understanding and capacity of the participants regarding immunization services and build a critical mass of change agents as champions for immunization and health in Nigeria, in the context of both routine immunization and the polio eradication initiative. Specifically, the study tour had the following objectives:

1. To increase participants' understanding of the position of Islam on Immunization in general, and polio eradication in particular
2. To provide participants the opportunity to discuss with Muslim scholars regarding the position of immunization in Islam
3. To provide participants the opportunity to understand the Role of Muslim scholars and leaders on immunization in Egypt
4. To provide participants the opportunity to discuss with Islamic scholars on the position of the Muslim world on immunization and
5. To encourage participants to become change champions and advocates for Routine Immunization services in their domains and Nigeria in General

The team was composed of Traditional and Religious Leaders from different parts of Northern Nigeria, including Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara, Gombe and Bauchi States. They were accompanied by representatives of the Jama'atul Nasril Islam (JNI), the National Programme on

Immunization (NPI) and physicians, medical scientists and epidemiologists from NPI partner organizations.

The team visited had meetings with renowned Islamic scholars from the Al Azhar University's International Islamic Centre for Religion and Population, medical experts from the University, the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, The World Health Organization and UNICEF. They also met with leaders of a well established national non-governmental organization (NGO) that supports development programmes through the provision of volunteers.

During the meetings with the scholars, ministry of health and the development partners, the team discussed key issues affecting immunization uptake and coverage in Nigeria and explored the medical and Islamic perspectives on these issues. The issues discussed included the Islamic view on immunization, safety of Oral Polio Vaccines (OPV) and the role of Traditional and Religious Leaders in effective programme communication and mobilization for immunization in Nigeria.

### **POST TOUR WORKSHOP ON THE FINDINGS OF THE EGYPT STUDY TOUR**

Following the tour, a post-tour workshop was organized by NPI, HERFON and EU-PRIME to build on the best practices from the Egypt study tour and strengthen immunization system through the support of the Traditional and Religious Leaders in Nigeria. Specifically, the workshop aimed at reviewing experiences and lessons learnt during the tour and identifying areas for applying the lessons learnt and best practices from the study tour within the immunization programming context of Nigeria.

Participants and other stakeholders were to identify strategies for implementing these best practices and discuss the roles of Traditional and Religious Leaders, and other stakeholders in implementing these strategies to improve acceptance, utilization and coverage of immunization in Nigeria, reduce the burden of vaccine preventable diseases and interrupt the transmission of wild polio virus by the end of 2007.

During the workshop, the team reviewed the lessons learnt and best practices from the study tour and had detailed discussions on the way forward to strengthen immunization acceptance and utilization, improve coverage and reduce the burden of vaccine preventable diseases and interrupt wild polio virus transmission in Nigeria by the end of 2007. Based on the review of the tour and the extensive discussions on the situation of immunization in Nigeria presently, the participants of the workshop made the following conclusions:

1. Immunization as a Preventive mechanism is HALAL (lawful) and necessary in Islam. Immunization is Halal in Islam based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the hadith. One of the hadiths (traditions) of the Prophet that constitutes a fundamental rule on which the Islamic

jurisprudence is built is ***“Harm not yourself or others” i.e. according to Shari’a, one has to avoid all that may cause harm to oneself or others”***.

2. The oral polio vaccine is safe. The OPV vaccine used in Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, is of the same high quality world wide. It is the same that was used in the USA, the UK, France, Turkey and others. There is no evidence to support opinions that it is used to control population of countries of the Muslim world. The issue of American and the western world policy to depopulate Muslim Countries through OPV is a rumor and not substantiated by evidence on the ground as regards Muslim Countries.
3. All vaccines are certified by the World Health Organization (WHO) before procurement by UNICEF. The process of certification is standard across manufacturers and country of use. UNICEF supports procurement of vaccines in forecasting and pooling resources to procure these vaccines at competitive rates. Vaccines are produced based on global needs and no specific batches are produced for any particular country. UNICEF is not influenced by politics and always kept to its mandate and core commitment for the best interests of the child. Country regulatory bodies such as Nigeria’s National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) certify the safety, potency and lack of contamination of vaccines.
4. Current intensive efforts to eradicate polio are due to the feasibility of it being eradicated as agreed and endorsed by all countries of the world, including Muslim countries (and Nigeria). Polio causes paralysis and deaths, the virus does not have a reservoir outside humans and a safe vaccine to prevent it is readily available.
5. The participation of Traditional and Religious Leaders in immunization activities in Nigeria should be strengthened at all stages of polio eradication and immunization service programming (including programme communication) to ensure their full ownership and commitment. Other members of the civil society including NGOs and community based organizations should also be actively coordinated in these efforts.
6. The Traditional and Religious Leaders should articulate their own communication programme to effectively mobilize their communities to utilize immunization services.
7. A mechanism for monitoring and responding to rumors should be effectively established.
8. NAFDAC’s certification of vaccines coming to Nigeria is commendable and should continue.

**The participants of the workshop agreed on the following steps as way forward to address immunization issues in Nigeria:**

1. Full briefing of the Jama’atu Nasril Islam on the findings of the study tour because of its crucial role in promoting immunization and child survival activities and acceptance in Nigeria.
2. Communicate the findings of the tour to His Eminence, The Sultan of Sokoto (who is the President General of Jama’atu Nasril Islam).
3. Jama’atu Nasril Islam to discuss these issues during its general meeting and come up with clear messages on immunization
4. Develop messages that will emanate from JNi and disseminate the messages down to the grass roots.

5. Participants on the tour should be active champions (Change Agents) of immunization in their domains. They should link up with the state teams and develop action plans that may be supported at the state level.
6. Documents (evidence) from the tour should be re-produced and disseminated widely.

Signed:

1. Professor (Emeritus) Umaru Shehu .....
2. The Emir of Gombe, HRH Alhaji Abubakar Usman Shehu .....
3. The Emir of Zamfara, HRH Alh. Attahiru Muhammad Ahmad .....
4. The Emir of Shonga, HRH Dr. Haliru Yahaya Ndanusa .....
5. Hon. Justice Abdulkadir Orire, Sec. Gen., Jama'atul Nasril Islam .....
6. Sheikh Tijjani Tahiru Bauchi (Bauchi) .....
7. Sheikh Haruna Abubakar Gwandu (Kebbi) .....