



Added value of partnership is critical to family planning

The Strengthening Community Health and HIV Response in Nigeria (SCHH) project

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Partnership is critical to Christian Aid's SCHH project in ensuring increased access to and uptake of crucial health services in rural, marginalised communities.

Christian Aid works with Marie Stopes International to provide family planning services to women in SCHH communities. SCHH community health agents (CHAs) speak to women about the advantages of leaving a longer gap between pregnancies, while Marie Stopes provides family planning services to interested women. Community dialogues are held at the outset to dispel myths, address any harmful socio-cultural beliefs about family planning and encourage men's involvement.

In many public health centres, like the family support clinic in Tarka local government area, Benue state, limited family planning services have been available. Birth control injections had been offered to women, but many were unwilling or reluctant, saying the shots affected their menstruation. Others complained the injections did not last long, and they became pregnant not realising they were unprotected.

Since 2013, Marie Stopes has offered women at the clinic a wider variety of longer-term family planning methods, reducing birth rates from about 20 to between 10 or 12 per month.



Tarka's clinic has witnessed a fall in birth rate.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Anieto

Respite for Bridget

In the farming community of Mbaawange in Tarka, mother-of-nine Bridget Iloorun has benefited from Marie Stopes' support.

Bridget 'became pregnant every year' because she was unable to afford family planning services. After her last child was born in 2013, Bridget decided to explore family planning options provided free of charge by Marie Stopes, after learning about the project from CHAs. She had a birth control device implanted, which is guaranteed to last for five years.

Bridget says she is healthier now that she has stopped having children, and is able to travel to the state capital to sell produce from her farm, bringing in more money to support her children.

Her oldest child, a 19-year-old girl, is married and already has a child. Bridget says she will tell her daughter about family planning services after she has 'enough' children, but it will 'depend on the approval' of her daughter's husband. After nine children, Bridget's own husband was more than ready for a solution and presented no opposition when the opportunity came.



Mother-of-nine Bridget loorun sought free family planning support from Marie Stopes.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Anieto

Bridget with four of her nine children.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Anieto



Bridget's story shows how SCHH empowers women and families in marginalised communities to take charge of their health and wellbeing, and often enables them to increase their income.

Renewed friendship for Christiana and Tersugh

Christiana Tersugh from Igbon¹ community in Logo LGA, Benue state, felt four children was more than she could cope with. Christiana, 25, says she always had to go to the health centre with her children or because she needed antenatal care. Christiana never knew she could use birth control to give her more time for herself and her children.

Christiana's husband Tersugh Jir, 32, had heard of family planning in passing but did not know what it actually meant. He knew birth control injections were available, but had also heard many negative reports from those who took the shots, so never considered that option. With birth control seemingly beyond them, they were afraid of having intercourse and withdrew from each other. The

¹ Igbon is about 100 km from the local government headquarters, and a typical community with a very bad access road, no electricity, piped water or health centre.

burden of buying baby clothes, paying for health and antenatal care and education for their older children put further strain on the relationship.

In 2014, months after the birth of Christiana's fourth son, the couple heard from a CHA about free family planning services offered by Marie Stopes.

Christiana and her husband Tersugh.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Anieto



'I am now friends with my wife and we don't fear pregnancy anymore,' says Tersugh in 2016, two years after his wife had birth control implants inserted into her upper arm.

With no baby to care for and no more pregnancies, Christiana now sells soya beans at the market. She is grateful she does not have to spend as much buying baby items, and can now save her money. Christiana and Tersugh can afford to send their children to the local community school, and they agree they will have no more children.

A life-changing experience for Janet

Janet Selchang, 35, had been scared to access family planning services despite CHAs in Nagane² community, Plateau state, telling her of their benefits and importance. Her husband was eager for her to access the services when he found out they were offered free of charge, because they already found it difficult caring for their seven children.

Janet eventually went to the health centre because the CHAs and Christian Aid partner CeGHaD had convinced the *galadima* (village head) to make a law compelling women to at least attend the information session about family planning services. Janet lined up with the other women to have an intra-uterine device (IUD) inserted but panicked just before it was her turn and made to leave. She had to be convinced by the healthcare officials to get the IUD inserted.

But when tests were performed before the IUD's insertion, centre staff suspected Janet had early-stage cervical cancer. The procedure was deferred and Janet was asked to return for further tests. Cervical cancer screening for women in marginalised communities is an important part of Christian Aid's partnership with Marie Stopes.

² Nagane is a marginalised community with an ill-equipped healthcare centre in Langtang South LGA, about 185km from Plateau's capital Jos.

In June 2014, Janet accompanied staff of Marie Stopes to Abuja for surgery. She was later fitted with the IUD. Two years later, Janet still cannot imagine what might have happened had she not gone to

the health centre that day. 'I thought I was healthy. I would never have known anything was wrong,' she says.

Janet has not had any more children and is now more focused on ensuring her five youngest children get a formal education.

Janet discovered she had cervical cancer.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Aniето



Too many sons for Iornenge

Iornenge Kwaghkor, a farmer from Tarka, was happy when his wife Mkuma gave birth to several sons in rapid succession. As his father's only son, he felt obliged to make up for the lack of male children in the family.

But by the birth of their fourth son, Iornenge wanted no more children, boys or girls. Mkuma had not been able to support the family financially as she was always pregnant or caring for the children.

When CHAs in Tarka told his wife about family planning, Iornenge welcomed the idea. Mkuma, 30, received free birth control implants from Marie Stopes in 2013. Now she can help her husband at the farm, as well as selling oranges. The extra income helps them take care of their existing children.

With the success of the partnership with Marie Stopes International, Christian Aid is seeking similar links to help deliver SCHH.



Iornenge and Mkuma with three of their sons.

Credit: Christian Aid/Nneoma Aniето



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