Improving health in ‘the forgotten zone’ in Ivory Coast

Economic migrants on the border between the Ivory Coast and Liberia have for many years been isolated with no access to health care. Since the Ivory Coast Red Cross Society engaged communities and ensured basic health services, maternal and child health indicators have improved dramatically.

Barriers to health care

For the 6,200 people who live in the distant village of Tomepleu in the Ivory Coast, the nearest health facility was for a long time situated 80 kilometres away.

Diallo Abdoulaye, head of the migrant community, explains that getting there is fraught with danger: “Many people have died on that journey, for example Compaoré, one of my sisters in law, she was having a difficult childbirth so we decided to evacuate her by truck to Blolequin town, but on the road the truck sank into the mud. She died overnight.”
Difficulties in reaching health facilities in time are a common cause of maternal death in the Ivory Coast. In 2013, only 18.4% of Blolequin district’s deliveries were performed in specialist units, but in the village of Tomepleu that was not even an option. A one-way motorbike ride to the distant health facility costs 23 euros - a fortune for poor farmers.

Red Cross action
The extent of the health care challenge became apparent to the Ivory Coast Red Cross after a 2011 post-election crisis, during which it mounted a mobile clinic operation. Two years later Red Cross introduced a maternal and infant mortality reduction project covering 13 villages including Tomepleu. The project aimed to improve maternal and infant health knowledge and practices, addressing key issues like malnutrition, immunisation, infectious diseases, family planning and danger signs of maternal, neonatal and child illnesses.

For the village of Tomepleu, this has resulted in building a health center, with a dispensary, maternity units and accommodation for a nurse and a midwife. It is equipped and staffed by the health district authorities and serves surrounding villages as well. A second center has been provided in the west of the Blolequin district.

Tomepleu has 21 of the 140 volunteers mobilised in the district who operate mainly through home visits. Among their duties, they identify and register pregnant women and children under 12 months, monitor vaccination and nutritional status and report what they find to health authorities.

Achievements
When Tomepleu’s health center is fully up and running, the Red Cross expects to see a dramatic improvement of key indicators in its catchment area. But for the project area as a whole, outcomes after three years already point to success.

The maternal mortality rate fell from 23 deaths per 1,000 women in 2013 to 16 in 2015 and the infant mortality rate decreased from 145 deaths per 1,000 live births to 52. Home visits allowed mother and child beneficiary targets to be reached and severe acute malnutrition was down from 4% to 0.3%.

Exclusive breastfeeding increased from 4 to 70%, while deliveries in a health centre rose to 60% in the project area, compared to 53% for the health district as a whole. By the end of the project, far fewer new mothers (25%) reported some maternal complications, compared to earlier in the project (77%).

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