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## Reaching the Community on COVID-19 Vaccination through Sensitisation of Muslim Scholars and Imams

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### Summary

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccination in Nigeria is an ongoing immunization campaign against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes COVID-19, in response to the ongoing pandemic. Before the COVID-19 vaccines were introduced, sensitization meetings with Islamic scholars on the vaccination brought together critical stakeholders in the communities to create support for the vaccine roll-out plan. The government leveraged the scholars' immense goodwill and reliable, tested, and trusted influence on the populace, built over the years to achieve the roll-out success. Medical experts were requested to first build the scholars' capacity with requisite knowledge on all issues relating to the COVID-19 vaccines until they were subsequently well-informed to become the ambassadors of the Muslim Ummah (community) responsible for coordinating, sensitizing, and promoting the vaccines for enhanced acceptance by the community in their domains including States, Local Government Areas, and communities. Vaccination began in the country on 5 March 2021 and as of 25 April 2022, about 8.4% of the population have been vaccinated. Strengthening this approach is therefore advocated.

### Introduction

People have witnessed the deadly, pervasive, and ravaging impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic which cuts across all facets of life. As of 29 April 2022, there have been 510,270,667 and 255,716 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6,233,526 and 3,143 deaths respectively reported to WHO globally and in Nigeria. Vaccines are a critical tool in the battle against COVID-19, a disease best prevented and quickly controlled



through vaccination. Thus, COVID-19 vaccines were made available within a year of the pandemic through unprecedented concerted efforts. The government had to overcome the challenges associated with sufficient supply and efficient rollout of the vaccines.

### Advocacy and Sensitization

Being aware that hesitancy in vaccine acceptance may pose a major hurdle to cross and that indeed, the fear of reluctance, resistance, or even outright rejection and opposition to the COVID-19 vaccines was real and cannot be wished away; properly monitored risk communication and information dissemination routes

and strategies involving all stakeholders and the community were mapped out. Sensitization workshops and Town Hall meetings were organized by the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA) in collaboration with the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Northern Traditional Leaders Committee on Primary Health Care Delivery, and the Presidential Steering Committee on COVID-19. Participants were leading traditional rulers including his Eminence, the Sultan of Sokoto, eminent Islamic scholars/Imams, medical experts, and distinguished Islamic personalities from the Muslim community nationwide who have in the past played very critical and significant roles in shaping the thought and practice of the Muslim community. The events were live-streamed



on social media with the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, the Minister of Health, and the Executive Director of the NPHCDA in attendance.

The overriding purpose of the sensitization was to undergo a training-the-trainer cum interactive session of sorts as follows:

- The medical experts equipped participants with new skills and knowledge on all issues relating to COVID-19 and the vaccines and the requisite attitude which enabled beneficiaries to mount an effective and efficient sensitization programme for their followers back home to enhance the acceptability of the vaccines.
- Participants posed frequently asked questions about the vaccines, which agitate the minds of the people, for clarifications. The experts cleared all possible doubts in the minds of participants for increased understanding and subsequent dissemination of the messages imbibed to their followers.
- A flexibly enforceable, sustainable, uniform, targeted, credible, and clear communication was designed by the trusted leaders, unequivocally stating and demonstrating the importance of getting vaccinated and the immense benefit to the well-being of the followers.

The messages were on the risk associated with COVID-19, its prevention, and the vaccine safety and benefits. During the events, COVID-19 survivors were also invited to speak from experience, while facilitators and medical experts were vaccinated. Pamphlets carrying messages on the Facts and Myths of COVID-19 written in the main Nigerian languages were produced and distributed.

## Sensitization Result

Feedback received from individuals seeking information on testing and vaccination schedules indicates successful sensitization and enhanced vaccine acceptance by the community. A total of



33,932,163 vaccine doses have been administered and 829,646 persons have received booster or additional doses since the introduction of the vaccines. Nigeria's target is yet to be met; however, with sustained sensitization, these numbers can be improved upon.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The sensitization ensured information reached the community as well as limited the spread of unfounded rumours or news that increases vaccine hesitancy which could hinder the targeted goals. Furthermore,



the concerns and queries of the populace were easily addressed through these channels of communication to ensure compliance and cooperation. This adopted approach should therefore be strengthened to achieve the targeted vaccination status in Nigeria.

### References

- WHO, 2022. <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/ng>  
 WHO, 2022. <https://covid19.who.int/table>