

A multi-sectoral approach to boost HPV vaccine uptake in Garissa



Social advocacy meeting with community leaders in Garissa town

In Garissa, a region where health initiatives often face cultural and logistical challenges, there is an approach that is making significant strides in protecting young people from cervical cancer. The Centre for Behaviour Change and Communication (CBCC), in partnership with UNICEF, launched a project aimed at increasing the acceptance and uptake of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine among adolescents. This project, however, is not just another health campaign—it is a multi-sectoral initiative that brings together various community leaders and stakeholders to ensure its success.

The importance of this collaborative approach became clear during a three-day social advocacy meeting organized by CBCC. The meeting brought together an array of influential figures, including leaders from the Garissa County Departments of Health and Education, primary school headteachers, religious leaders from institutions such as SUPKEM, CIPK, and IRCK, Board of Management (BOM) members from various schools, National Government Administration Officers, and leaders of youth and women groups. The diverse representation underscored the necessity of involving multiple sectors in the fight against cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine, which was introduced in Kenya in 2019, had seen low uptake in Garissa, with coverage rates as low as 6%. The reasons for this were manifold, including resistance, misinformation, and a lack of adequate public health education. Recognizing these challenges, the CBCC-led initiative emphasized the need for a unified front—a strategy that could only be achieved through the active involvement of all key community stakeholders.

Over the course of the sensitization meetings, the leaders were educated on the critical role the HPV vaccine plays in preventing cervical cancer, which remains one of the leading causes of death among women in Kenya. The discussions were frank and open, allowing leaders to voice their concerns, ask questions, and understand the scientific evidence supporting the vaccine. By the end of the three days, a consensus was reached: for the vaccine to gain wider acceptance in Garissa, a multi-sectoral approach was not only beneficial but also essential.



Sensitization of parents at Jaribu Primary School

With this agreement in place, CBCC wasted no time in organizing health education talks with parents of girls and boys aged 10 to 14 in three key schools: Garissa Primary, Iftin Primary, and Jaribu Primary. These schools were strategically chosen for their central locations. The involvement of the Departments of Education and Health was crucial, as it lent credibility to the initiative and helped in mobilizing the parents to attend the meetings. The school meetings were designed to be informative and interactive.

Parents were given detailed explanations about the HPV vaccine, its benefits, and the potential consequences of not vaccinating their daughters. Healthcare professionals addressed common myths and misconceptions. Despite these efforts, resistance from some parents was inevitable. Concerns ranged from fears about the vaccine's safety to suspicions about its necessity. However, the multi-sectoral approach proved its worth as different leaders took turns addressing these concerns. The headteachers reassured parents about the safety of the vaccine, while BOM members emphasized the importance of protecting one's health. The collaboration between these sectors created a unified message that was harder to dismiss.

In the end, the persistence paid off. While not every parent was immediately convinced, many left the meetings with a new understanding of the vaccine's importance. Some even decided on the spot to allow their children to be vaccinated, a significant victory in a region where scepticism about new health interventions is common. Within the two days, 123 girls aged 10 to 14 were vaccinated in the 3 schools. The success of this initiative in Garissa highlights the power of collaboration in public health.

By engaging multiple sectors—education, health, religion, and national government administration and community leadership—the project has created a strong foundation for increasing HPV vaccine coverage in the region. The commitment of these stakeholders to work together ensures that the message about the vaccine's life-saving potential reaches even the most remote corners of Garissa. As the project continues, it serves as a model for other regions facing similar challenges. The Garissa initiative demonstrates that when communities come together, united by a common goal, they can overcome resistance, dispel myths, and protect future generations from preventable diseases. The multi-sectoral approach is not just a strategy—it is a necessity for the success of public health interventions in complex, culturally rich environments like Garissa.



Adolescent girls showcasing their vaccination cards at Jaribu Primary School