Soft spoken but confident, optimistic and assured, Fred Chemuko could easily pass for a government official or a college professor. As a public health specialist in Uganda, however, Chemuko’s focus is on the health challenges his country faces, and the vital role that he and others are playing in Uganda’s immunization efforts.

“We are a bridge between the national and the community levels,” Chemuko said. “That bridge is important to make sure that information is clear at all levels, and our existence opens the eyes of the community to the benefit of immunization services.”

AN INFORMATION CHAIN

The “we” Chemuko refers to is the Maternal and Childhood Illnesses Secretariat (MACIS), a national network of 281 health-focused civil society organizations. MACIS extends the reach of the national immunization program, mobilizing areas underserved by the national campaign, while also informing national immunization policy. Chemuko says the cornerstone of that effort is an information chain that runs from the community level all the way to the Ugandan government. Before MACIS, that structure was nonexistent.

“We ensure that all information from the grassroots level reaches the national level, and that information from the national level reaches the target population,” Chemuko said. “We also help the policy makers to know what they are planning for [by bringing] community-level knowledge to the national level.”

After first identifying the civil society organizations (CSO) best positioned to help, MACIS provided training to community health volunteers. By bolstering their skills in data collection, advocacy and report writing, MACIS established these volunteers as the first link in the information chain.

“CSO’s play the role of social mobilization,” Chemuko said. “They are also responsible for information sharing, and they build networks to bring communities together. They provide accountability through dialogue.”

Gathering critical information on immunization gaps, staffing shortages and supply problems, the community volunteers then pass that information on to one of the 103 District Immunization Champions also identified and trained by MACIS. The champions’ role is not only to gather and process the information they receive, but to ensure it reaches government District Health Officers who report directly to the national policy makers.

PASSING THE MESSAGE ON

“The District Health Officers take us very seriously and they include us in their planning,” Chemuko said. “They have seen how important a role we play, and that is a result of this partnership with the District Immunization Champions.”

Passed on from the district level, information gathered locally then reaches the regional level through what are called Regional Nodes. These nodes receive reports from
all of the districts in their region, addressing any gaps with government health officials. As a node for Uganda’s Eastern Region, Chemuko says that his role is not only to serve the District Immunization Champions, but also health officers who may not have access to immunization policy makers.

“The District Health Officers themselves are often not able to communicate the need for more support in their communities because they have no contacts at the national level,” Chemuko said. “So they are able to communicate their needs to us and we can pass that message on.”

National-level MACIS representatives are the last link in the information chain. Equipped with monthly reports passed on from the Regional Nodes, MACIS meets regularly with government health officials to inform national policy. And while challenges to access and information flow still exist, says Chemuko, it is a structure that is showing results.

“The immunization coverage in our areas has increased overall,” Chemuko said. “I have seen great improvement.”

That improvement, Chemuko says, is what drives him to do his job. As a career public health specialist, Chemuko knows better than most what is at stake if the national immunization network breaks down.

“What motivates me is seeing different players working together to improve immunization at all levels,” Chemuko said.

“I want to ensure that children’s lives are improved, because to develop as a nation we first need healthy children.”

Fred Chemuko, Regional Node in Uganda, links community health volunteers with national policy makers on immunization issues.

A community health volunteer prepares to deliver a vaccination to a newborn at the Bushika Health Center in Busanza, Uganda.