

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE FLAG-OFF OF THE 1999
NATIONAL IMMUNISATION DAY**

BY THE COURT ASIGN OF THE CLERK OF THE DISTRICT COURT
AT THE CITY OF NEW YORK

**ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY, PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FLAG-OFF OF THE
1999 NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION DAY, ABUJA
8TH OCTOBER, 1999**

Protocol

I am glad to address you today on this occasion of the flag-off of the 1999 National Immunization Days scheduled for 9th-15th October, 1999 and 20th-26th November, 1999, and the official launching of the Nigeria Immunization Fund (NIF) which is a private sector initiative.

These events are great strides in our efforts to eradicate poliomyelitis—a disease that cripples and occasionally kills our children, as well as ensuring sustainability in our routine immunization services.

Polio is a vaccine preventable disease. It is one of the six childhood communicable diseases targeted for control under the National Programme on Immunization.

Since 1979, Nigeria has been part of the global Polio Eradication Initiative. The Expanded Programme on Immunization was formally launched in 1984 and renamed in Nigeria as the National Programme on Immunization in 1985 so as to reflect its national identity as a programme by Nigerians, for Nigerians.

The 49th World Health Assembly in 1988, set the year 2000 as the target date for global polio eradication. Amongst key strategies for polio eradication are :

- (i) National Immunization Day which involves the administration of Oral Polio Vaccine to children under the age of 5 years ;
- (ii) routine immunization aimed at providing infants with vaccine protection,
- (iii) active surveillance reporting of cases of Acute Flaccid Paralysis to measure the effectiveness of the immunization activities.

In May and June 1999, using the novel strategy of *House-to-House* immunization, over 20 million children were immunized with oral polio vaccine in the 15 states that participated in the exercise. There is evidence that the *House-to-House* strategy provided the best outreach to delivering vaccines and other health services to the greater proportion of our children. Nigeria enjoys the pride of being the first African Country to have adopted the *House-to-House* approach.

While the result of National Immunization Days has so far been impressive, it has been observed that the routine immunization has continued to decline over the years. Routine coverage for all antigens is estimated to be 40 per cent or less. Many reasons have been attributed for this. Some cite lack of political will and lack of support for immunization activities. Furthermore, there is the problem of conceptualisation of immunization services. About 5 million infants join our population every year ; these children need to be fully immunized during their first year of life. This means that government at all levels must consciously make provisions annually for these children to be immunized. Immunization services need to be boosted, maintained and sustained, otherwise the coverage begins to decline as new unvaccinated children join the population.

Currently, the Federal Government has provided routine vaccines nationwide. I hereby urge the appropriate use of these vaccines to avoid a '*functional stock-out*' leading to further decline. Indeed, '*functional stock-out*' should not exist in Nigeria as immunization is the right of every child.

The opportunities of the Nigeria Immunization Fund (NIF) cannot be over emphasised. In the past, health was commonly perceived as the sole responsibility of government. Indeed, the government has the social obligation to see that all citizens are adequately provided for in matters of health. Nevertheless, the economic realities are such that it would be foolhardy to imagine that government alone can fund the health sector. The NIF programme being launched today demonstrates that there are alternative means of taming the harshness of those realities. Also, the NIF initiative is a much welcome response to the invitation, in my inaugural address, extended to the private sector to join our administration as partners in progress.

By the legal instrument of Decree 12 of 1997, the National Programme on Immunization (NPI) was created to enhance its operational capacity towards the attainment and sustenance of immunization activities. The Decree also empowers the National Programme on Immunization (NPI) to collaborate with the private sector in all areas of implementation of its activities.

Let me commend the major contributors, such as First Bank of Nigeria, for their efforts towards ensuring that adequate funds are made available by the private sector for the Nigeria Immunization Fund. The fund will be managed by a board of trustees to ensure its continuity, as transparency and accountability.

The year 2000 deadline from the World Health Assembly is only 450 days from today ! Nigeria has got all it takes in terms of human and material resources

to achieve the goal of total eradication of polio. The Nigeria Immunization Fund will provide a much needed impetus for the achievement of this goal.

Polio has been eradicated from countries with socio-economic profiles that are similar to Nigeria's. So, we too can do it. Not that we have much choice ; polio eradication is now a global issue, and we have no option but to strive and join the league of polio-free nations. And with Nigeria having the unique chance granted by the World Health Organisation to be the first nation in Africa to apply the *House-to-House* strategy, we are rather obliged to succeed in order to encourage our brother nations in Africa.

Our Government through the National Programme on Immunization is committed to providing all the necessary political will and support that will guarantee that every Nigerian child is protected against vaccine preventable diseases.

In the pursuit of this objective, the government has not only procured vaccines for routine and supplementary immunization services, but has also set up zonal vaccine cold stores currently operational in Bauchi (North-East), Kano (North-West) and Lagos (South-West) while arrangements have reached an advanced stage for the take-off of three other Zonal Cold Stores at Minna (North-Central), Warri (South-South) and Enugu (South-East) by the year 2000. It is my hope that State and Local Governments will reciprocate the good gesture of the Federal Government by fully supporting all immunization services.

At the end of the National Immunization Days, it is expected that every household and every child under the age of five years will be identified and immunized with Oral Polio Vaccine. The exercise requires extensive social and political mobilization. It also requires massive mobilization of resources from both public and private sectors.

The *House-to-House* immunization will provide the opportunity to extend immunization services to communities that have till now been inaccessible. It will also afford us the opportunity to stimulate mass awareness not only for NIDs, but also for routine immunization services.

Furthermore, it will provide a forum for the communities to actively participate in delivering immunization services and assist in searching for and identifying cases of acute flaccid paralysis. It is obvious that this is a daunting and expensive venture and the government cannot go it alone.

I also want to urge leaders in areas where there have been communal clashes to put their differences behind them during the forthcoming National Immunization

Days, for the sake of the innocent children and to avail them the opportunity of being immunized against polio. We have lessons to learn from countries at war who had to agree to a cease-fire so that their children can be immunized. In the same vein, it must be pointed out that religious belief cannot possibly be good enough grounds for denying children access to this life-saving service.

At this juncture, on behalf of the people and government of Nigeria, I wish to express sincere appreciation to all those whose contributions have made the launching of the National Immunization possible. In particular, I wish to thank Rotary International, World Health Organisation, UNICEF, United States Agency for International Development, Department of Foreign and International Development, Christian Health Association of Nigeria, and Red Cross International. May I also use this forum to recognise the contributions of various sectors of our economy such as the oil sector (Texaco, Mobil, Shell, Chevron), food/pharmaceutical industries (Nestle, Beecham, Pfizer) and aviation sector (Nigeria Airways, Chanchangi, EAS, Okada and Kabo Airlines).

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my honour and privilege to launch the Nigeria Immunization Fund (NIF) and invite our noble citizens, individuals, corporate bodies and diplomats to respond generously to this legacy. Similarly, distinguished audience, I have the pleasure and pride to formally flag-off the 1999 National Immunization Days "House-to-House" strategy. May God guide and protect every participant in the exercise as you, travel over land, water, air, hills and valleys to immunize our children.

Thank you and God bless you all.