

## Mobilizing to Prevent Cholera

November 24, 2010

"I had heard something of this disease of cholera, but didn't have any information about it," says Nadine Charles, 20, who lives in Dufossé located in the outskirts of Gonaïves a city in the north-west of Haiti. When her baby girl got sick she didn't know what it was. Her husband insisted that someone had put a voodoo curse on them and as he practiced the voodoo religion he performed rituals to remove the spell. But the girl died in the early hours of the morning and Nadine's only other child got sick as well. By the time they got the child to the hospital it was too late and the husband himself was showing symptoms of having cholera. He died the next day. "We did not know," says Nadine who now is living with her husband's family.

CHF mobilizers have been trying to change that -- reaching out to 15 communities around the Gonaïves province and giving people vital information on cholera prevention and good hygiene practices. They have driven out in motorcycles in order to be able to get to the most inaccessible populations, going door-to-door, talking to families, community leaders, to people in groups or individually.



A CHF mobilizer gives cholera prevention information to a man in the village of Bresson on the outskirts of Gonaïves.



Nadine Charles, 20, lost both of her children and her husband to cholera. A CHF mobilizer talks to her (forefront) and her community.

They have been able to reach up to now over 53,000 people and have handed out 12,000 cholera flyers with vital information on prevention, symptoms and treatment.

"I decided to sign up to be one of CHF's mobilizers," says Esther Metellus, 28, "because I want to save lives in my country." She says that all the communities have welcomed them and all have said that they have learned a lot from their intervention. "For example," says Esther, "the people told me that they didn't realize that they should wash their hands with running water rather than directly in the recipient."

Esther has ardently been advocating for prevention measures ever since she took the CHF hosted training given by UNICEF and IOM. Before the work even begun she had gone to her own community and organized get-togethers at homes of friends. "I love when people who I've spoken to can repeat to me all that they have learned from our mobilization," she says.

### Fast Facts

- **53,211 people reached by CHF cholera prevention mobilizers.**
- **3,969 households received information from CHF mobilizers on cholera and good hygiene practices.**

# Giving out vital Health Information

Photographer: Les Stone



A CHF mobilizer emphasizes to community members living in remote areas the importance of good hygienic practices.

"It is thanks to the work CHF is doing," says Jean Baptiste Exantus the Community Counselor (called CASEC in Haiti) for the 4<sup>th</sup> Section of Gonaives, "that many more people were not infected by cholera in our area." Already there had been 130 cases in his jurisdiction and 17 of those died of the epidemic.

The Casec was also very appreciative that CHF involved all levels of the community and its leaders. "The first thing the CHF team did was to contact us, coordinate with us and inform us also about the disease." Counselor Exantus says that they themselves did their own assessment of the work CHF has done and found

that the population in their zone was much more educated about the disease and on better hygiene methods.

Gonaives is in the Artibonite Department, from where the epidemic started and spread. It has been the hardest hit in the number of cases and deaths. Up to now, there have been 60,240 cases and 1,415 deaths due to cholera reported in Haiti. Of these, a majority of the cases have come from the Artibonite region.

"We and everyone in the community are very afraid of this disease," says Rose-Mireille Siméaus, 27, mother of a three-year old boy. "From when I was born I had never heard of this disease, this cholera, I had never ever seen such a thing in my life." Now, she has personally seen many in her community getting infected. CHF mobilizers arrived to give her all the necessary information. "Now that we are informed we will do everything possible to protect ourselves in order that we don't get infected by this dangerous disease. We have learned a lot of things we didn't know before."



Photographer: Les Stone

CHF mobilizers gave out 12,000 Ministry of Health approved flyers with cholera information and good hygiene practices.

The Casec of Dufossé, Romulère Metellus also confirms that the people in his zone knew nothing about the disease before. "We had a big problem because many people attributed this disease to some kind of evil spirit," he says disapprovingly. "So this is the best thing that could've been done at this time. As a community we would like to say 'Ayibobo' (Hallelujah) to CHF."

## Fast Facts

- 12,000 flyers officially approved by the Haitian Ministry of Health have been distributed by CHF.
- 20 CHF mobilizers on motorcycles have gone out to reach even the remotest populations.



# Mobilizing to raise Cholera Awareness



Both young and old are given information on cholera prevention practices.

tion and education is at the base of the problem,” explains one of the CHF mobilizers Charles Louiders, 27, who as an educator himself is even more aware of the problem and was for this reason motivated to join the CHF team. “What is great is to see people accepting to listen to us, understanding the enormity of the problem and deciding to do the necessary actions in order to avoid cholera,” he says nodding. “I know that the more we can educate people, the more protected they are. I feel that I am saving lives in doing this work.” For this reason, he not only educates people in the working hours, but afterwards mobilizes in his neighborhood, with friends and family. “Even,”

he adds smiling, “anybody I can find by chance on the street.”



Rose-Mireille also lives in Dufossé. The remote rural village has only one communal pipeline where everyone gets their water and they all use the same river to bathe and wash their clothes. “I will not neglect the hygiene measures, to wash the hands constantly, especially after going to the latrine, before eating something and always cooking food well.”

IOM is helping CHF in its mobilization efforts by donating to them the Ministry of Health approved flyers on cholera prevention. The CHF mobilizers have distributed 12,000 of these copies in Gonaives. Rose-Mireille finds the flyer a good reference point. “I am ready to apply all the information they have told me and the images on the flyer they gave me will help me a lot in practicing them.”

Sonel Saintil, 29, who lives in Cité-Jeanne, a small village on the foothills of the mountains surrounding Gonaives, was visited by CHF mobilizers last week. “After receiving the information we have taken care to treat the water that we consume,” he says. At the moment they are bathing in a close-by ravine but Sonel has begun to make arrangements that the water is brought to the house, to get it treated and then used for bathing. He says that now his community is well aware of cholera’s symptoms. “We watch to see if a person has a diarrhea that is white in color, like rice water, and if the person is vomiting.” Thankfully, their small community has been able to contain the disease and only two people so far have been infected.

“The lack of informa-



After receiving hygiene and prevention information from CHF mobilizers, one household installed a custom-made water dispenser. In order for the children to wash their hands they have to pull the string to get the running water.

Charles points out that unfortunately there is a wrong thinking among his people. “Here there is a saying that ‘bacteria can’t kill Haitians’ and this is exactly what is making our situation worse,” he says gravely. “Thus, we have to now protect ourselves more and change our attitude.”

CHF mobilizers found that people accepted their information and understood the importance of following the good hygiene practices recommended.