



A community health volunteer weighing a baby at the Rima Ra Pera Dispensary in Kilifi County, Kenya. WORLD VISION JAPAN

BUILDING MOTHER-TO-MOTHER NETWORKS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH IN AFRICA

In the pursuit of universal health coverage, Japan has been actively working to strengthen global healthcare in a variety of ways. One of these is the Mother to Mother SHIONOGI Project, an initiative that supports maternal and child health services in Africa by enhancing healthcare facilities and fostering networks among mothers.

Japan has been actively promoting and contributing to the progress of global health, prioritizing it as a key area of international cooperation. The country is actively involved in both government-led and private-sector initiatives toward universal health coverage aiming to ensure that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, without financial hardship.

The Mother to Mother SHIONOGI Project is a private-sector initiative launched in 2015 by Shionogi & Co., Ltd., a major Japanese pharmaceutical company. It aims to strengthen self-sustaining communities in Africa that can support the health and well-being of mothers and children. Following the first and second phases in Kenya, the third phase is now expanding to Ghana.

The project was first conceived by a Shionogi

employee participating in the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) overseas volunteer program. While assisting AIDS prevention measures in Kenya, she recognized that many people were discontinuing their medical treatment due to inadequate counseling and insufficient understanding of the effectiveness of medication and treatment, both situations resulting from a lack of human resources. That highlighted the need for, more than simply medicine, an improved treatment environment and expanded capacity building.

At the same time, she noticed that Kenyan mothers were especially motivated to seek treatment to protect their children. That made a lasting impression on her, inspiring her to propose, after returning to Japan, a project focusing on maternal and child health in Africa.



The project has three main pillars: (1) the improvement of infrastructure, (2) education and sensitization, and (3) the enhancement of a community support system. Kenya has long grappled with high mortality rates for mothers and children under the age of five. TANI Yukari from Shionogi's Office for Children's Bright Future, who has been involved since the first phase, explains, "Simply providing clinics and facilities for clean water wasn't enough to ensure their usage."

The project's first phase saw the construction of a health dispensary with the addition of a maternity ward, along with the training of community health workers. Improvements in patients' awareness of and behavior toward their health followed, with the average annual number of patients visiting health facilities growing 80% and the percentage of all births taking place in clinics jumping from 4% to 47%. "It demonstrated the effectiveness of such comprehensive action in improving healthcare access," notes Tani.

The second phase of the project focused on strengthening collaboration between local clinics and higher-level hospitals, while the ongoing third phase extends support to Ghana, focusing on improving maternal, newborn, and child services including prevention of child diarrhea.

In Kenya and Ghana, the project works closely on the ground with experienced international NGOs such as World Vision Japan and the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP). To ensure the continuity of services beyond the project's duration, local governments have been entrusted with managing operations after the project ends.

A key focus of the Mother to Mother SHIONOGI Project is forming peer groups where mothers can learn from one another. The project aims to promote the use of health services throughout the community, where mothers who have already learned about

Left: In the third phase of the project, operations were expanded to Ghana, where the first maternity waiting house was opened as an effort to improve access to healthcare.

Below: MASUDA Kumiko (right) and TANI Yukari (left), from Shionogi & Co., Ltd., are both involved in the Mother to Mother SHIONOGI Project.



health, nutrition, and water purification can share their knowledge with other mothers. The groups have proved popular, with nearly a thousand women having taken part from 2015 to November 2023.

"The power of word-of-mouth communication among mothers is universal. In February 2024, we opened the first maternity waiting house (where pregnant women can stay and prepare pre-birth) in Ghana, and word has been spreading about the positive experiences of mothers who gave birth there. We hope that the mother-to-mother groups will also take root in Ghana," says MASUDA Kumiko, senior director of Shionogi's Office for Children's Bright Future.

Protecting children's health is the cornerstone of a thriving, sustainable society. The project gives hope that connecting mother-to-mother groups across different regions and countries will bring about changes in awareness, ultimately leading to further improvements in global health.

Japan remains committed to enhancing global health through an integrated approach that includes building health facilities, fostering public education, and collaborating with local governments, with the goal of creating a lasting impact on health worldwide. ●

A mothers' group gathering in Kenya. The system allows mothers to share knowledge learned from clinic staff and community health workers, thus helping spread information on an ongoing basis throughout the community.

