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YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE WEST AFRICA
REGION

A POLICY BRIEF BY ONYEDIKACHI NDUKA UKPABI

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BACKGROUND

The emergence and spread of infectious diseases have always presented significant challenges to global health systems and policy makers. One such disease that has garnered attention in recent years is mpox. Although endemic to western and central Africa, outbreaks in non-endemic countries have raised concerns about policy implications and the need for effective prevention strategies, particularly in the West Africa region.

Mpox is a rare viral zoonotic disease caused by the Mpox virus. However, recent outbreaks in non-endemic countries have raised concerns about the policy implications and prevention strategies, particularly among young people in the West Africa region. This article delves into the policy implications of the mpox epidemic and highlights key regional strategies for prevention among young people in West Africa.

Understanding Mpox:

Mpox is caused by the Mpox virus, which belongs to the orthopoxvirus family. It is similar to smallpox and shares clinical characteristics, including fever, rash, and flu-like symptoms. There are two clades of the virus: the West African clade and the Congo Basin clade. Historically, Mpox has been endemic in parts of Central and West Africa, primarily affecting animals like rodents and monkeys. Human infections usually result from close contact with infected animals.

Outbreaks Beyond Africa:

In recent years, there have been reports of Mpox outbreaks outside of Africa, which has raised concerns about its global spread. The introduction of the virus to non-endemic countries highlights the importance of global health policies and strategies to prevent further transmission. These outbreaks serve as a reminder that infectious diseases do not recognize geographical boundaries and can pose a threat to global public health.

THE IMPACT OF MPOX VIRUS ON YOUNG PEOPLE IN WEST AFRICA

In children the risk of infection is more likely for household members and other close contacts of an infected person. As of November 16, 2022, 57 pediatric cases have been reported in children 0-5 years old and 605 cases have been reported in adolescent/ young adults 16-20 year old in the U.S. Young children (under 1year of age), children and adolescents with eczema and other skin conditions also young people with

immunocompromising conditions may be at increased risk of severe disease when they contract mpox¹.

Young people in West Africa have been disproportionately affected by Mpox virus due to their high levels of contact with animals, less developed immune systems, and low levels of vaccination coverage². The disease causes significant morbidity and mortality, and outbreaks can have a severe impact on communities, leading to social disruption and economic losses. Outbreaks have been reported in several West African countries, including Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo³.

In the current mpox outbreak in the U.S, cases of mpox among children and adolescents has been rare (0.3% of all reported cases as of September 24th 2022)⁴. A report published on November 3rd, 2022 described the epidemiologic and clinical features of 83 cases of infection in children and adolescents. Among them, there were 16 cases among children <5years, 12 cases in children 5-12years and 55 cases among adolescents 13-17years. Most adolescents (89%) were male. The most common mode of exposure for children <12years was close contact with infected household members while for adolescents the most common exposure was through male to male sexual contact⁵.

CHALLENGES IN PREVENTING MPOX VIRUS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN WEST AFRICA

Several challenges exist in preventing Mpox virus among children and adolescents in West Africa. These challenges include

- I. Low Levels of Vaccination Coverage
- II. Limited Resources for Surveillance
- III. Case Management
- IV. Inadequate Public Health Education
- V. Weak Health systems.

Additionally, the disease is often misdiagnosed or underreported, making it difficult to track and respond to outbreaks effectively.

¹ Monkeypox: causes and symptoms: <https://www.mycllevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22371-monkey>.

² Epidemiological Review on Mpox: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9991112/>

³ Mpox in Africa Union Member States: https://africacdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AfricaCDC_MonkeypoxBrief4_3Aug22_EN.

⁴ Clinical Considerations for Mpox in Children and Adolescents: <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/mpox/clinicians/pediatric.html>

⁵ CDC's monkeypox pediatric considerations; CDC's monkeypox clinical considerations for children and adolescents: <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/clinicians/pediatric.html>.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. **Global Surveillance and Reporting Mechanisms:** The mpox outbreaks in non-endemic countries emphasize the need for robust global surveillance systems. Countries should be encouraged to promptly report cases to international health organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) to facilitate coordinated responses.
2. **Strengthening Health Systems:** The presence of Mpox in non-endemic countries underscores the importance of strong healthcare systems that can diagnose, treat, and manage infectious diseases effectively. Policies should focus on building the capacity of healthcare professionals and facilities to respond to such outbreaks.
3. **International Collaboration:** Policymakers need to foster international collaboration to address cross-border health threats. Collaboration between affected and non-affected countries can aid in sharing knowledge, resources, and best practices for prevention and control.
4. **Vaccination Policies:** The mpox outbreaks highlight the importance of vaccination policies. Developing effective and accessible vaccines can play a crucial role in preventing the spread of the disease. Policymakers should prioritize research and development in this area.

KEY REGIONAL STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN WEST AFRICA:

Given the endemic nature of mpox in certain parts of West Africa, there are several strategies that countries in the region can adopt to prevent and control outbreaks:

1. **Public Health Education:** Implement comprehensive public health education campaigns to raise awareness among young people about Mpox. Information about the disease, its symptoms, transmission, and prevention methods should be widely disseminated.
2. **Hygiene Practices:** Promote proper hygiene practices, including regular handwashing and maintaining personal hygiene. Young people should be educated about the importance of avoiding contact with sick animals and their fluids.
3. **Animal Contact Awareness:** Encourage young people to be cautious when interacting with animals, particularly those that are potential carriers of the virus. Avoiding direct contact with rodents and monkeys can reduce the risk of transmission.
4. **Vaccination Campaigns:** If a vaccine becomes available, launch vaccination campaigns targeting young people. This can be done through schools, colleges, and community health centers.

5. **Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in prevention efforts. Community leaders and influencers can play a vital role in disseminating accurate information and encouraging preventive behaviors.

Cross-Border Collaboration: Strengthen collaboration among West African countries to ensure a unified approach to disease prevention and control. Joint efforts can be more effective in addressing regional health challenges.

SUCCESS STORIES IN PREVENTING MONKEYPOX VIRUS IN WEST AFRICA

Despite the challenges, several success stories exist in preventing Mpox virus in West Africa. Successful vaccination campaigns have been conducted in four West African countries Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana and Democratic Republic of Congo leading to a decrease in the number of reported cases. Additionally, improved surveillance and case management have led to more effective responses to outbreaks, reducing their impact on communities⁶.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the increasing re-emergence of mpox outbreak demonstrates that other infectious illnesses have been neglected since the covid-19 pandemic. Therefore some of these measures must be taken to reduce the spread of mpox.

- i. To safeguard individuals who are more vulnerable to contracting the virus, campaigns such as outreach program in schools, marketplace and townhall meetings should be implemented, particularly in countries with inadequate access to proper healthcare facilities. This outreach should debunk myth that discourages vaccination based on literacy, culture and socioeconomic considerations.
- ii. Government should create an enabling environment for community and rural areas by providing clean and good water, healthcare facilities, committed healthcare professionals and other amenities. Government must also devise measure to finance mpox research by providing research grants, specializing in drug/vaccine development.
- iii. Also when making decisions and health policy the community should be allowed to actively participate so as to make informed decisions and change about their health.
- iv. Awareness and outreach program for adults and adolescents on the dangers of unprotected sexual intercourse and its relationship with mpox.

⁶ CCP Awarded Funding for Monkeypox Prevention Work in Four African Countries
<https://ccp.jhu.edu/2022/09/12/monkeypox-africa-rcce-usaid/>

CONCLUSIONS

Mpox virus remains a significant public health threat in West Africa, particularly among young people, with attendant policy implications. The prevention and control of the disease require a range of measures.