

COMMUNITY CATALYST

A SOCIAL MOBILIZER'S SYNERGY WITH LEADERS AND CAREGIVERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POLIO



In the heart of Mbanza-Ngungu, Thérèse stands as a force against polio, embodying the power of women in leading public health initiatives. As a mother of five and PRESICODESA*, she seamlessly weaves her roles as a caregiver, wife, and community leader, championing polio vaccination.



Thérèse Matondo Makaya during a home visit in the Athénée health area of Mbanza-Ngungu. Photo Credits: UNICEF/Christian Mokili/2023

Every day for **Thérèse Matondo Makaya** blends family life with her dedication to her community's health. «*When there's an emergency, or if someone calls me about a problem, I immediately stop what I'm doing and go to help find a solution*», she describes, emphasizing her readiness to act swiftly in times of need. She's deeply thankful for her supportive husband, who understands the demands of her work. «*Sometimes, I have to leave food cooking and rush out, maybe to help a woman giving birth at night, staying with her till morning if needed*», Thérèse shares. In essence, she sums up her commitment: «*Every day, I do something for my community*».

Her commitment stems from a simple yet profound truth: «*Polio is preventable by vaccination*». Thérèse doesn't just advocate for vaccination; she ensures every child in her community receives it.

«*To parents and caregivers who claim to love their children, I say: have them vaccinated. Because to vaccinate is to love.*»

This message is at the heart of Thérèse's mission, reflecting her deep commitment to her community's well-being. People's respect and love for Thérèse are clear when they call her "mom", showing how much they trust and value her. «*Being called 'mom' by everyone, no matter their age, makes me really proud*», Thérèse says.

Thérèse's leadership has been instrumental in implementing transformative changes in her community, notably in eradicating home births and reducing maternal and infant mortality rates. She attributes this success to strategic initiatives: «*The introduction of the CFC approach was crucial. It enables us to monitor all essential family practices (PFE) for children, pregnant women, and households. Furthermore, with registers provided for children under 5, managed by CACs, we can thoroughly track vaccinations*», Thérèse explains. This systematic and community-focused approach has played a significant role in enhancing the health and well-being of her community.

The road Thérèse travels is not without its challenges. Convincing a rural population, steeped in traditional beliefs and practices, to

embrace modern healthcare practices is a monumental task. Yet, her strategy is simple but effective—patience and love.

«*By being patient while insisting with love, we succeed*», Thérèse shares, showcasing her strategy for fostering change and emphasizing the critical role of women in healthcare.

Her call to action extends beyond her community:

«*To peers, continue to sensitize and educate the population in favor of vaccination without getting tired. To local and national authorities, make vaccines available quickly... To UNICEF and other partners, continue supporting the DRC in terms of vaccination.*»

*President of the Health Area Development Committee

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